

The Human Condition a potpourri

Martin Nelson

EDCS

Pygmalion Revisited

Semi-detached

| These are works of fiction. The characters are fictitious. Any similarity between them and living persons is purely coincidental.

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EDCS

One quarter of all human diseases and disorders are attributable to environmental factors of which EDCs (Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals) are the most widespread. Hormone sensitive diseases such as breast cancer have increased in the last fifty years

Sagon born with intersex, working in Professor Uarvis' lab conducts experiments on EDCs with mice. She meets Steven a lecturer who helps her achieve her goal.

Chapter 1

I was mystified. Now approaching sixty I was coming to the end of an illustrious career in which together with my partner Professor Steven Evans, I had found the answer to a question that had been troubling me most of my life. I was now ready to move on to a less demanding challenge.

It was therefore a surprise when I began receiving unexpected phone calls from the media.

‘Hello is that Professor Evans?’

‘Yes may I help you?’

‘This is the Daily telegraph. We have heard a rumour that your name has been submitted for a Nobel Prize for Medicine. Can you give us a quote please?’

‘I’m sorry; I think you’ve made a mistake. You must have the wrong name, goodbye.’

Again the phone rang,

‘May I speak to Ms Evans?’

‘Speaking,’

‘This is the BBC we have heard a rumour that you have been nominated for the 2155 Nobel Prize in Medicine? May we have your reaction?’

‘Please I don’t understand. You’ve got the wrong person; I don’t know anything about this. Good Bye.’

Throughout the day the telephone rang again and again. Finally I decided I must find out what was happening. Was someone playing a trick on me? Why would anyone want to do that I wondered but how to find out?

A number of my papers on Intersex and the correlation with drinking water had been well received and even widely quoted, and I had written a major book on the subject. I was also being approached by Oxford University who were looking for a Professor in Medicine. But this Nobel Prize business was a mystery to me.

Stephen was facing the same barrage. As co-author of most of the publications, the media was also pestering him.

We had no sooner sat down to lunch than I launched into a tirade.

‘Steven what’s going on? I don’t know what’s happening? I’m getting a lot of hoax phone calls about winning the Nobel Prize?’

‘That’s strange so am I?’ Then we looked at each other. Steven reached for my hands across the table and his voice went hoarse as he said,

‘Could it be true? Maybe we have been awarded the prize. It’s unbelievable. I don’t want to think about it, to wake up and find it isn’t true.’

Just after 4 o’clock that afternoon, the telephone in my office again rang.

‘Hello is that Professor Evans?’ Asked a distinctly foreign male voice.

‘Yes Professor Evans speaking.’ I could feel my heart racing, was this really happening? I waited.

‘I have been instructed by the Nobel Prize award committee in Stockholm to inform you that you and Prof Steven Chambers have been awarded the Nobel Prize for Medicine for the current year 2055. Congratulations you will be receiving details of the award ceremony in a few days time.’

The line went dead. I sat, struck dumb, unable to move. I wanted to laugh and then cry, burying my face in my hands. It’s not possible. It can’t be happening? I wanted to savour this moment, to hold it for as long as possible.

Finally I stood up and walked to the window and looked out. The scene looked familiar, nothing had altered but in that moment I knew that my life had changed. It would never be the same again. I must speak to Steven. He will be over the moon. I felt a sudden surge of pride that our work

had been recognized. Then I thought of my parents both of whom were now dead. They would have been so proud; I hoped that somehow somewhere they knew.

Twenty-four hours earlier:

David listened straining his ears to hear every word. He had waited all day for the call and now it had arrived. The voice, speaking slowly with a northern accent, recounted the findings of a secret meeting held at No 10 earlier that day. David knew that what he was hearing was accurate. His mole had never let him down; as a result he had gained the reputation for being a source of highly sought after information.

In his youth, David was an ordinary student just managing to scrape through University with a Third grade Honours. He would have remained an unknown had it not been for a chance meeting in a pub in Doncaster. Sitting at the bar he got into a conversation with a man sitting to his right. He could hardly see him in the gloom. He was probably in his early thirties, unshaven with a mop of reddish brown hair. He remembered his eyes a steely grey rarely blinking. His voice was blurred as if he already had too much to drink. As the man told his story David couldn't help but feel

sorry for him and gave him a £50 note. They parted and he thought nothing more about it.

Some years later a note came through his letterbox from the same man who was now a successful entrepreneur. Then followed a reciprocal friendship. David had explained that he was a journalist but couldn't get his foot in the door. To his surprise, he began to get phone calls out of the blue with information, valuable information that no one else had. At first he didn't know what to make of it. They would be short accounts of some current political issue. Uncertain what to do he began to write to the letters' page of the major newspapers raising the subjects. Within a short while he received e-mails from the editors wanting to know more details and secret meetings were arranged. His reputation rapidly grew and soon all the major papers were fighting for his stories.

The New York Times, March 15, 2055

headline:

'BEWARE THE IDES OF MARCH.'

The world is facing a catastrophic situation.

Written by their leader writer David Bellow.

During the last 50 years there has been a growing incidence of babies born

with intersex. The birthrate in the major industrial countries has dropped by 30 % and only one in three babies is deemed to be sexually normal.

Professor Brian Uarvis working in the Fertility Laboratory somewhere in Sussex, England (the exact address is top secret) has produced intersex offspring in mice by feeding them a high dose of Oestrogen. It is the first time that this has been achieved in mammals although sexually deformed fish in association with Oestrogen contaminated water has been known for years.

Male fertility has dropped in association with a severe reduction in sperm count and the incidence of breast cancer has swelled dramatically. It now affects men, as well as women in their thirties and forties.

Increasingly questions are being asked about who is a female and who is a male as the frequency of intersex increases. The issue is being discussed at the highest level.

Professor Brian Uarvis was late which was unusual. His secretary Joan was about to phone his home to make sure he was OK.

'Let's wait another twenty minutes,' suggested Jennifer his assistant, 'I'm sure its nothing to worry about.'

Brian had woken early as usual, left the house and returned twenty minutes later

sweating lightly after his morning run. He had broken his leg as a child and needed to exercise it as much as possible. He was just finishing some fresh orange juice when the kitchen door was flung open and his oldest daughter Janet stormed in waving the morning newspaper.

'Dad, look what I've read in the paper. There is a big article about your lab. Dad, what on earth are you doing experimenting on rats?' Brian looked up from his juice. He saw the anger and disappointment in her eyes.

'I tried not to,' he muttered.

'You promised,' she interrupted. 'You promised,' her voice rising almost to a shout. 'How could you? You promised,' she repeated tears streaming down her face.

'I know I did and at the time I meant it but we couldn't get enough humans to volunteer so we had to do the next best thing.
The work couldn't wait.'

He had carefully avoided telling her how critical the work was. He wasn't certain she would understand what was happening and he didn't want to frighten her. But perhaps now was the moment.

'Look Janet, I want to tell you something that I have tried to keep from you

at least until you were old enough to understand.'

Taking a deep breath he blurted out,

'You were conceived by artificial insemination, I'm sterile.' He said the words slowly to let them sink in.

'You! Sterile. What does that mean?'

'It means that my sperm cannot make a baby. Your mother and I learned about it when she couldn't conceive. Tests on me showed that, well, I was infertile for want of a better description. Do you understand?'

'Let me try and explain. Many recent studies have shown that more and more men like me are sterile, so much so that there has been a significant reduction in birth rates around the world.' Janet thought for a moment.

'That's a good thing isn't it? I keep hearing that there are too many people.'

'Yes and no.'

'How do you mean?'

'Well yes, there are too many older people. But we have a shortage of young people especially males. In fact the birth rate has dropped dramatically. The usual 2.4 births per couple in developed countries had dropped to one or even none.'

'Maybe people don't want kids any more. I could see why, they must be a real drag,' said Janet.

‘That could be the reason but we know it isn’t. Couples are coming forwards in increasing numbers saying that they have tried and can’t conceive. And the studies have shown that like me many men are sterile. It’s becoming a very serious problem and we can’t just ignore it.’

Then something clicked in Janet’s mind.

‘Dad, do you mean that you’re not my father?’

‘Well it depends how you define father? Biologically you are correct. I am not your father but emotionally and in every other way I am.’

‘I think that’s a great answer. As far as I am concerned you are my dad no matter what the biology says.’

‘Yeah I think so. Look I’m going to be late, we can talk more when I get home tonight?’ They hugged.

‘OK Dad but don’t forget I’ve got a lot more questions.’

Brian put on his jacket and left the house.

On the way in he phoned the lab,

‘Sorry I got held up. I’ll be there in ten minutes.’

The Research Department was on the third floor of the medical block. A philanthropist Mr Ali Shanon had donated the funds to build it after the death of his wife from a

blood clot thought to be due to her contraceptive pill. He wanted the department to develop a safer pill, one that did not affect the blood clotting mechanism, a non-Oestrogen pill. He had offered the money to develop a new medication to be as effective as the present ones but without the risks. But this had been sidetracked by the increasing concern about the rising levels of Oestrogen-like chemicals in water.

Despite advertising for volunteers emphasizing the importance of the work, Professor Uarvis had had few applicants and the project was rapidly grinding to a halt. But by using mice, the whole project got back on its feet. Mice were so much better than humans as experimental animals and they had the advantage that they shared more than 95% of human genes and were therefore an ideal model to experiment on. They reproduced frequently, 4-5 litters a year and were easy to house, needing only small cages.

Chapter 2

In Boston Yorkshire, an alarm rang in the doctor's mess at its newest hospital the Obama Clinic.

'Not again,' murmured Dr John Saville, recognising the call number, it had come from Maternity. He was the intern on

duty, a tall athletic young man who following his father's footsteps had dedicated himself to the challenge of childbirth. As a teenager he remembered the pain suffered by his parents at the loss of a newborn child, a sibling he would never know and love.

'That's my third call to maternity this week,' he muttered. 'What's going on?' He picked up the phone.

'Doctor come quickly we need your help.'

He recognised Peggy's voice. There was a note of panic. She was the senior nurse on the delivery suite, an experienced midwife and someone not easily unnerved.

Entering the labour room John could feel the tension; faces were drawn, the atmosphere was anxious, instructions were being issued, crisp and blunt. He took in the scene immediately; a young woman was resting after giving birth, her newborn baby sleeping quietly in a cradle.

'Doctor, come and have a look, please tells us what you think,' the sister whispered. John carefully loosened the nappy and peered at the genitalia.

'My God,' he said to himself. 'Another one with confused anatomy both male and female.' He carefully wrapped up the baby and gently handed the bundle to the nurse who stared at him with tears in her eyes.

‘What shall we put down on the chart? It’s too awful. I don’t know what we are going to do. I haven’t told the mother. I don’t know how to do it. It will so upset her.’ The doctor nodded, taking her arm.

‘Leave it to me. Take the mother back to the ward and say nothing. I’ll come by in an hour and speak to her.’

It was not the first time he had to face the confusion and sadness of a new mother coming to terms with her less than perfect child and he never knew exactly what he would say.

Mrs Julie Evans was dozing when Dr Saville returned later that day. He knocked lightly on her door and entered. She hadn’t heard him come in and didn’t stir. He crept in and sat down by the side of her bed and looked at her. He noticed the dark shadows under her eyes and her pale complexion. This was her third natural birth in three years and it had taken its toll. She stirred and opened her eyes slowly, focusing on the doctor sitting silently by her bed.

‘Oh doctor I’m sorry, I didn’t know you were there.’

‘It’s OK, I didn’t want to disturb you and you needed the rest.’

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘somehow this one has been more exhausting, I don’t think I had recovered completely from my second.’

‘Don’t worry there is no rush, you can rest here until you are strong enough to face the family.’

‘Julie, may I call you Julie.’ She nodded. ‘There is something I have to tell you.’ He saw her face screw up.

‘Something? What something? Is there something wrong with my baby?’

‘No your baby is very healthy. But I do need to speak to you and your husband. It’s better if both of you hear what I need to say. Could you arrange for him to come, say this evening if possible?’

‘Can’t you tell me please?’

‘It’s difficult, it would be better if I spoke to you together.’

‘Is it going to die?’

‘No! No, nothing like that. You have a healthy bonny child.’

As soon as the doctor had left the room Julie rang her husband. He was a foreman working on a building site. There was the noise of drilling so at first he didn’t hear his phone ring.

‘Damn! He never answers his phone,’ Julie swore impatiently. ‘I’ll try again.’ This time he heard it and saw her name appear on the screen He removed his gloves and answered.

‘Hi darling, how are you feeling?’

‘Fine, I’m fine Simon,’ she said. ‘The doctor wants to see us together tonight; there is something wrong with the baby. I’m so worried. He didn’t want to tell me without you. Can you come in after work?’

‘I’ll come now.’

‘No, he said about 6, OK?’

‘Yes fine darling, don’t worry I’m sure it’s nothing serious.’

He switched off his phone and wiped his brow. He tried to put her call out of his mind but kept coming back to it. What could it be, cancer? Oh my God could it be cancer? Over the afternoon break he was unusually quiet.

His friend Bill could tell that something wasn’t right.

‘What’s up Simon? You look out of sorts, is something wrong?’

‘I don’t know? The hospital wants to see the missus and me tonight. She doesn’t know what it is. I’m worried.’

That evening, back from school, Janet was eagerly waiting for her father when he stepped into the front hall.

‘Dad is it all right if we can talk some more?’

‘Sure come into my room. So where was I? That’s right. I was saying that there are too many people in the world and it wasn’t such a long time ago that we were

complaining that the birth rate was too high and that there wasn't going to be enough food to go around but things seem to have changed. In recent years male fertility has dropped dramatically and we're not sure why. That is what the experiment was about. I wanted to examine male sperm counts and needed about two thousand volunteers.'

'Two thousand?'

'Yes, we need that number to eliminate other variables. The plan was that I would measure the amount of Oestrogen-like material in the drinking water and relate it to the sperm counts in men living in different parts of the UK. The finding of a low count and high Oestrogen levels would suggest that the two were related. But I would still have to test it on laboratory animals to confirm my suspicion do you see?'

'Yeah I guess so.'

Clearing it with his supervisor, Simon left work early and rushed home. He was sweating and could smell his own body odour. He showered quickly and put on his best suit. He always felt better well dressed particularly if he was going to hear bad news.

The hospital entrance was quiet as he stepped through the rotating doors into the air-conditioned foyer. He glanced briefly at the big clock on the wall, five minutes to six,

just in time he thought. The lift took him silently to the third floor. Alighting he turned right towards room 310. He paused outside took a deep breath and knocked gently on the door. He heard a muffled, 'come in'.

Julia, wearing a pink nightie, was propped up in bed. He kissed her lightly on the cheek and sat down. At her side was their baby tucked up in a cot.

'Say hello to your new baby,' but he didn't move. He wasn't ready yet to greet his child not until he knew the worst.

A light tap on the door and Dr Saville entered. He had removed his white coat and was wearing Jeans and a T-shirt. He shook Simon's hand, greeted Julie and sat down next to her.

'Thank you for arranging to meet me here, I know it may have been inconvenient. The reason I wanted to see you together is because I need to talk to you about your new baby.' Simon choked back his fear.

'Before I talk about your baby, I want to describe to you the changes a baby goes through after conception. As you know at that moment the male sperm of Simon fused with your egg Julie, the process of making a new life began. A single cell is formed that begins to divide again and again forming your baby's body. At about 8 weeks a recognizable baby has developed and at that time the sexual organs begin to differentiate.

Initially they are the same for a boy or a girl but under the influence of hormones, the male and female anatomy develops differently. Are you following me so far?’

They both nodded. Simon was finding it very interesting and forgot for a while that the doctor was talking about his own child.

‘From about eight weeks onwards it is possible to make out a small penis in the male and an opening in the female. Fast forward and by about twenty weeks the fully differentiated sexual organs are present. You may be wondering why I am telling you all this.’

‘Yes,’ they both said.

‘It’s because sometimes the body gets it wrong and we get a child with bits of both sexes. That is what has happened to your baby.’

‘How do you mean?’ asked Simon looking puzzled.

‘Your child has developed both a penis and a vagina, otherwise the baby is perfectly healthy,’ he added quickly.

There was a silence in the room; neither Julie nor Simon knew what to say. They were trying to understand what had just been said.

Simon was the first to speak.

‘Do you mean doctor that you don’t know whether our baby is a boy or a girl?’

‘Exactly; right now, the baby’s gender is undecided.’ At that moment Julie began to cry noiselessly.

‘My poor baby, my poor baby,’ she kept on saying. Simon squeezed her hand tightly.

‘It will be all right Julie, what matters is our baby is healthy. I thought it had some serious disease like cancer. I was so scared of what you were going to say,’ he added looking at the doctor.

‘Doctor, may I look and see what you mean?’

‘I don’t want to look.’ sobbed Julie, ‘my poor child how can it ever forgive me?’

Simon looked at the doctor in despair. The doctor leaned forwards and carefully unwrapped the gown and loosened the nappy. Simon peered at the child.

‘You see,’ said the doctor pointing, ‘there is a penis but you see there is also a vagina.’

‘Yes I see what you saying,’ said David pensively. ‘What does it mean?’

‘At this moment we don’t know what sex the child is. We need to do some tests which will help us to decide.’

Julie was distraught. She didn't know what to think. Had she done something so bad that her child had to be punished? The more she thought about it, the more troubled she felt. She sensed that she was adrift. Everything she held dear was being challenged.

This had happened once before when her father had died suddenly. She had been very attached to him. He had always called her 'his girl'. One minute he was alive and and the next no more.

She was only a child at the time but remembered how shocked she was when she looked on his dead body. It was the beginning of a long period of bouts of depression. Looking back, she realised that they were always associated with something sad or unexpected.

Chapter 3

It was late afternoon and upstairs in the manager's office. A number of senior doctors and administrators had assembled. There was only one subject on the agenda. It was the increasing incidence of intersex in babies born in Maternity and how to deal with it.

In the chair was Mrs Harinda Shah a young woman smartly dressed in a Sari. She began the meeting.

'Good evening colleagues, I am sorry to have called this meeting at such short

notice and at this late hour. We are meeting today to discuss a matter which is becoming of increasing concern to us all, not only in this hospital but in the world at large. I would like to ask Dr Abdul Singh our Obstetrician to outline the problem.'

A stocky diminutive grey haired man in his middle fifties stood up.

'Thank you madam chair.'

'In the last five years we have been keeping statistics on the incidence of intersex in children born in our Obstetric unit. On average there are 600 – 1000 births a year, of these between 5-10% have some degree of anatomical variation. We have seen this figure slowly rise.' A hand went up.

'Yes Professor?'

'Madam chair, I would like to ask my colleague whether the increase has been seen equally across the ethnic groups?'

'Yes, there seems to be no difference that we can identify.'

Another hand went up,

'What does he think we should do about it?'

'I don't think this is a local problem, I believe it must be dealt with at a national level. With this in mind there is a meeting in the Department of Health next week to discuss the matter, which I shall be attending. Meanwhile we need to make sure

that we have enough adequately trained staff to deal with the psychological backlash. Professor Lilian Gombe Psychologist, put up her hand,

‘Yes, Professor you want to say something?’

‘Yes Madam chair, as you know the Dept. of Health has given this the highest priority and has promised to allocate extra funds to allow hospitals to employ more trained staff. Up to now this money has not been forthcoming so we remain dismally understaffed to deal with this increasing problem. Is it possible to divert some of the hospital funds for this purpose?’

Several hands were raised.

‘Yes colleagues I know what you are going to say that all departments are short of funds,’ answered Mrs Shah, ‘and of course it is true, But this is a humanitarian issue, families are desperate for advice and support. Professor Gombe how much do you need?’

‘My department could benefit from two more staff. That would relieve the load on the other staff.’

‘How much would that cost?’ Prof Gombe gave a figure.

Mrs Shah turned to the members,

‘Has anyone got any objection to this money going for this very good purpose?’

No hands went up,

‘Good then it’s agreed.
‘Thank you colleagues,’ said
Professor Gombe, ‘ I know my parents will
be most grateful.’

Julie was waiting to hear from the doctor when they could take the baby home. She knew that a number of tests were required. Some blood tests and scans had already been done, but more were needed. They were also due to see a psychologist. The tests were carried out the next day after which she and Simon took their baby home. Both were still reeling from the news.

Once at home, Simon couldn’t wait to introduce the little one to the new bedroom that they had specially decorated with characters from Mickey Mouse on the walls. Having settled the baby into the cot they sat holding hands watching it sleep.

Then spontaneously and without speaking they stood up and still holding hands went into the garden. The sky was clear with a million stars twinkling in the heavens. It was Julie who spoke. ‘Does it really matter if the sex of our beautiful child is undecided neither a boy nor a girl. It is only governments and bureaucracy that concerns itself with these details. All of us are a mixture. What matters now is that we do all in our power to ensure that they are happy

and grow up to be a fulfilled human being. When the time comes they will decide what he/she wants and we will be there to support and love them whatever choice he/she makes.

A sudden cry from their baby shook them back to reality.

'I'll change the nappy,' Julie said, 'if you will start dinner.'

Over the kitchen table, Julie looked at Simon and reached for his hand.

'I have been thinking about a name, we can't use the names we chose can we. We could wait and see the results of the tests and then decide or we could choose a name that would be right for a boy or a girl. What do you think? I was doing some reading and found this one which I liked.' Simon wasn't really following what she was saying.

'How do you mean?' He asked suddenly. 'A name you said? Yes you're right, we can't go on calling him/her or baby can we?'

What did you find?'

'Simon, just think about it before you say no please. It's not easy. We have never thought about this before. I like the name Sagon. It's a boy or a girl, it means wisdom.'

'I know what it means,' he snapped, 'it just seems so strange we don't know

whether we have a boy or a girl, I just can't get my head around that.'

That night neither of them could sleep. Although they didn't speak to each other they each knew that the other was awake.

Julie and Simon had arrived early to see the Psychologist. They were the first and sat in the empty waiting room until the receptionist arrived and took her place behind the desk. After a few moments she looked up.

'Are you waiting to see the doctor?' she asked.

'Yes Dr Joseph the psychologist.'

'He is not here yet but he works in room three. Why don't you wait outside his room and they will call you in when they are ready.'

A few minutes later a tall, dark complexioned man in his middle fifties wearing a light-coloured suit with an old school tie nodded to them as he went into Room three.

'That must be him,' whispered Julie.

'He looks very serious.'

'Mrs and Mrs Evans please come in.'

The two followed him into his office, a minimally decorated room with white ceilings and walls. One of which was completely covered by rows of books.

Dr Joseph leaned forwards and shook their hands.

‘May I call you by your first names?’
They both nodded. ‘You have been sent to me by your Physician to discuss a matter which I know is causing you great confusion and heartache. May I begin by saying that you have a lovely baby who I am sure will grow up to make you both proud. You I know want the best for them. I have spoken to your doctor and have the results of the blood tests and scans. So let’s start with the facts. Firstly your child has XY chromosomes- that is the normal findings for a boy. Secondly your child has a vagina but no uterus and a small clitoris/penis and finally your child has ovaries. You see it’s a mixture and therefore the child does not fit into a typical boy or a typical girl. Julie was listening intently and then she began to sob silently. Simon immediately went to her and put his arm around her.

‘It’s all right dear we will work it out. It makes no sense now but let’s hear what the doctor thinks.’

Dr Joseph continued.

‘The question is what do you want to do?’

‘What are our choices?’ Asked Simon.

‘In the past you would have been advised to decide what gender your child most resembles and adjust the sexual parts accordingly. But in the light of new research, some advise to do nothing now and bring the

child up in as near normal way as possible. Later if necessary a decision can be made. It doesn't have to be made now do you see?' They both nodded. Before you decide. I think it would be a good idea to see a surgeon and an endocrinologist.'

That night neither Julie nor Simon could sleep. They had left their baby soundly asleep and returned to their own bed kissed good night and turned off the light.

Simon spoke first,

'Are you awake Julie?'

'Yes, I can't sleep. I keep going over in my mind what the doctor said. I thought he would tell us what to do but he seems to have left it to us.'

'I know, its really difficult and we have so little to go on. How can we decide?' What are we going to do?'

Julie paused.

'I like the idea of doing nothing.'

'How can we? We can't leave the child without a sex? How can we do that? Think what will happen when school begins.'

The next morning Simon woke to find Julie not in bed. He got up and went to the window. He saw her standing in the garden holding their baby in her arms. She was looking up to the sky as if praying. Simon crept downstairs and listened.

‘Dear God, I know that what you do is always right and that it is our ignorance that makes us question you but please show me why you have burdened this little one, this innocent child with such an affliction. Help me to understand your ways and trust in you.’ Simon stood listening. Then he quietly walked out to her and put his arms around her.

The interview with the surgeon Mr Paul Higgins was scheduled for the following week. Meanwhile Julie and Simon searched for all the reports they could find about Intersex. They read to each other snippets of information from newspaper articles, books and the Internet. They found much of it confusing and conflicting. By the time they were due to attend the consultation with the surgeon they were still baffled but much better informed than before. They thought they even knew the choices and what decision they wanted to make.

Paul Higgins was a tall athletic looking man with a mop of reddish hair, striking blue eyes and a Scottish accent. He came from a medical family and specialised in Intersex surgery. He spoke with a soft Scottish brogue.

‘Good morning Mr and Mrs Evans,’ he began, ‘I’m Paul Higgins please call me

Paul. The hospital has asked me to see you to discuss the treatment of your child. I understand that there is a problem of gender definition and that you have come to discuss normalizing surgery. Have you decided which sex you think is most appropriate?' He continued.

'I think the doctor suggested a girl but let me examine the little one and we can decide.'

Julie couldn't contain herself.

'I'm sorry Doctor. What are you talking about, normalizing surgery? Are you crazy?'

'Julie please,' interrupted Simon 'don't get angry, he is only doing his job.'

'It's all right,' interrupted Mr Higgins. 'I understand that it is very upsetting but be assured when it is all done you will be much more at ease. Please remove the baby's nappy so that I may examine the little one.' Julie undid the diaper for the doctor to see. Simon looked away.

'I see, yes I understand the problem, it must be very confusing for you?' he said turning to Julie and Simon

'Let me tell you the result of the tests. If there's anything that you do not understand please stop me. Julie and Simon had heard it before but they listened patiently. The blood tests show that your baby is XY, that is a male configuration. The

male hormone testosterone is present in significant amounts suggesting a male. But the anatomy is confused, some features of a girl and some of a boy.'

Julie couldn't contain herself.

'So what does that all mean doctor, please explain what choices we have.'

Getting up and walking to the window he turned,

'You can decide to let him be a boy. I would close the vagina, and give him male hormones or you could chose to let her be a girl in which case I would shorten the penis and give her female hormones.'

Julie looked at Simon and said,

'Thirdly? What about the third option?'

'I don't understand,' said the surgeon getting a bit embarrassed. 'There are only two sexes, your baby must be one or the other.'

'No there is a third option.

'A third option? I don't understand.'

'Do nothing; let our child decide when they are old enough to know what they want.' There was a silence in the room; only the clicking of a desk clock could be heard. After a few minutes the surgeon coughed.

'Julie, you do know what you are saying? You are condemning your child to a life of uncertainty, of misery not knowing

whether it is male or female. Is that what you want?’

‘No what I wanted was a normal child. What we have is a child that questions our understanding of sex, who is otherwise healthy and happy. Have I or anyone else the right to change that? Can you assure me that what you want to do will make our child happy? No what you are advising is based on convenience and not on understanding; a custom that believes it knows what is best for a child. But is it possible that we have got it wrong?’

‘I see,’ said the surgeon scratching his head. ‘If that’s what you want, I will write to your doctor letting him know your decision. I feel it is my duty to tell you however that I think you are making a terrible mistake. If you change your mind please don’t hesitate to come back.’

‘Thank you doctor.’ said Julie, ‘we appreciate your help, good day.’

Outside in the car park Simon turned to Julie,

‘What on earth happened in there? Before we went in we were undecided what we wanted. What made you so certain to do nothing.’

Julie took his hand.

‘I don’t know. As I listened to him outlining what he recommended we should

do and I looked at our baby lying peacefully asleep, I knew I couldn't let the doctor do surgery. Something said to me that nature made our child that way and it was our job to make sure that our child grew up healthy and happy. That is what we are going to do and if you agree we will call the little one Sagon a name that can be both a boy's or girl's.'

Simon took her in his arms,
'I love you so much.'

Chapter 4

As time went by Julie could see that Simon was unhappy. When they were together, he seemed to be preoccupied with something. He would sit staring out of the window deep in thought. One evening just before they went to bed she broached the subject.

'Simon something is bothering you. I've noticed that you are not your usual self. You are normally full of fun playing with Sagon but recently you've sat in your chair with your thoughts somewhere else, not with us. What is it? Talk to me?'

'It's Sagon; the boys at work keep asking me what is our baby a boy or a girl. I don't know what to say.'

'Tell them the truth.'

'No, that wouldn't be any good they wouldn't understand. It's making me very

unhappy. Are you sure we made the right decision? Shouldn't we go back to the surgeon and ask him to make Sagon into a boy. Isn't that the best thing to do?'

'Darling I can see it's very difficult for you. It's difficult for me too, but think of Sagon. Suppose we get it wrong and they decide to be a girl, can't you see what a terrible thing we would have done?'

Simon wasn't convinced. Later at work, a conversation with his friend Bill really upset him.

'Simon can't you see that you and Julie are making a big mistake over Sagon. She/he whatever! It may be all right now but when she gets to school, she will go through hell being teased and laughed at. You must do something now.'

'What can I do?'

'Take the child back to the doctor and have it all put right.'

'That's easier said than done, you don't know Julie. Once she digs her heels in there is no changing her.'

'Who's the boss in your house?'

On the way home, Bill's words kept ringing in his ears. 'Who's the boss in your house?'

'I am, I am,' shouted Simon to the windscreen. Julie was in the kitchen when he let himself in. He marched in and without even greeting her said,

'I've had enough. I'm not going to stand around and see Sagon, what sort of name is that? She will become the laughing stock of the school. We must do something.'

Julie was taken aback by his hostility.

'What's happened to you? Why are you so angry?'

'I'm angry because I've let you convince me to leave our child in limbo land and it isn't fair. I am going to take her back to that surgeon and have her put right.'

'You'll do no such thing. She's doing fine and we agreed didn't we?'

'Yes but I didn't understand?'

'Oh yes you did. You were with me and you agreed and I am not going to let you ruin Sagon's life do you hear.'

'I'm not going to give into you.'

At 10 o'clock sharp the court official called, 'silence.' A bowed grey haired man in his early 60's entered the room and sat down behind a desk. The Official continued, 'Judge James officiating.'

It was the Monday morning session of the Family court preparing to hear cases of family dispute. He called the first case.

'Would Mr and Mrs Evans please rise.' Julie and Simon stood feeling self conscious and uncomfortable.

Judge James began,

‘Mr and Mrs Evans, this is a family court. Here the rigid protocol of English Courts does not apply. Please feel at ease and tell me what the problem is. Simon turned to Julie who nodded to him.

‘OK I will explain. My wife Julie and I have a 3 month’s old child who the doctors say is neither a boy nor a girl, the word Intersex has been used to describe the condition. We have seen a number of specialists and have been advised by a surgeon that our child should undergo corrective surgery and be made into a boy or a girl. I think that it is in the best interest of our child to have the surgery. My wife has another view.’

‘OK’ said the Judge, ‘would Mrs Evans please tell the court her view.’

‘Your Honour, about three months ago I gave birth to a beautiful baby. We were thrilled to have the baby but our happiness was marred when we learned that our child’s body was not normal. Our child had the features of both a boy and a girl. I was horrified. I had never heard of such a condition and it made me very sad as I felt that in some way it was my fault. As my husband has said we had the opinion of experts and one in particular, the surgeon recommended surgical correction. We were asked to make a decision whether to make our child a boy or a girl.

I struggled for days trying to find some reason to do what the specialist wanted and I couldn't. In the end I decided that the best thing to do was to do nothing and let our child decide in due course. At the time my husband agreed. I love my husband and want to support him as much as possible but I can't agree to let our child have surgery. It seems so wrong.' Julie began to cry.

The Judge coughed and sat without saying anything. He had never had to officiate in a case like this. Simon stood up went over to comfort Julie. There was a silence in the room as the judge struggled to come to a decision. Finally he stood up, cleared his throat and said in a very subdued voice.

'I am reminded of Solomon's decision in the bible, two conflicting opinions. In the end he recommended that the child be cut in half but you all know the outcome. This clearly would not be a solution in this case. At that moment Simon who was still holding his wife stood up.

'Your honour may I say something.'

'Yes please do, anything that will help resolve this impasse.'

'I don't think I realised the depth of feeling that my wife Julie had about this matter and hearing her today I realise that what I want to happen would break her

heart. Your Honour, although I still think surgery is the correct treatment, I am prepared to reconsider my view.'

Chapter 5

At the Ministry of Health in Whitehall the meeting was just beginning. The chairman Mrs Joan Forsythe the Minister for Health rose. Banging her gavel on the desk she said,

'The meeting will come to order. We are here to discuss the evidence for the harmful effects of Oestrogens in our drinking water. Will Professor Uarvis please present the results of his work?'

Professor Uarvis walked slowly to the lectern, limping slightly from a motorcycle accident when a teenager. He stroked back a mop of white hair, adjusted his glasses, looked down at his notes and began.

'Ladies and Gentlemen, many of you will know that over the last twenty years my laboratory has been collecting evidence concerning the purity of the world's water. Despite some difficulty due to attempts by certain governments to obstruct our research and to challenge our results, we have taken samples from all four corners of the globe and the results are irrefutable. The slide you are seeing shows the levels of Oestrogen-like chemicals measured over the last five

years from four sites, the Atlantic, Pacific, Indian and Arctic oceans. They show the same pattern; a slow but relentless increase at all sites.

This has been associated with a number of biological changes. I would now like to leave that study to Professor Mary White an Oceanologist.'

'Professor White will you please let us have your findings.'

A stocky youngish woman wearing slacks and a sweater walked onto the platform.

'Madam Chair, Gentlemen, I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to you today. Before giving my findings I should like to thank Professor Uarvis and his staff for the support he has given me in my work. In particular, he has been of inestimable help in allowing me to join him on his expeditions and to take samples of the species within the oceans.'

'Now my results; we have studied a number of species of fish and shellfish and they all show the same changes, a blurring of the defining features of males and females and the appearance of a number of intermediary species not previously described. In the absence of any other explanation we conclude that there is a contamination of the waters of the oceans causing these transitional species.

‘Next may we hear from Dr Abdul Massi an Obstetrician and Gynecological Specialist.’

A young man with a beard and long hair went onto the platform. He was wearing a white shirt and jeans.

‘Madam Chair Ladies and Gentlemen, our study covers a five-year period. I have reviewed the incidence of Intersex in the world’s literature as well as information from over 500 Obstetric units worldwide. It is the term we are now using to describe those babies that are born with ambiguous gender i.e. with a mixture of male and female features together with chromosomal and hormonal inconsistencies. The results have shown an overall increase in incidence over the study period from 1 per 1000 live births to more than 50 per thousand. At the commencement of this study we assumed that these variations were part of the mosaic of living creatures, the variability of nature but in the light of the rapid increase we have come to the conclusion that there is some noxious agent, which is the cause of these increases.’

Later on that day, there was an opportunity for informal discussion and it was at one table that Professor Uarvis was asked to describe his research in rats.

'In the light of the undoubted increase in intersexual forms in fish and in other sea dwellers, I decided to see whether I could produce a state of intersex in mammals, I chose the mouse as it is biologically very close to man and is readily available. I selected two biologically identical groups. I fed one with a normal diet and the other with a diet high in Oestrogens. Rats normally have up to four to six litters a year so we were able to get a result in a relatively short time.

The initial findings were staggering. An intersex baby mouse occurred naturally every two years in the control group. In the experimental group we saw it jump to 10 per year. I have no doubt that Oestrogens in the water are a factor in the increasing incidence of these findings. I am concerned that even in the control group, the water is contaminated and we are now wishing to repeat the study using pure water. I am at present searching for a source.

Chapter 6

Now that the court case was behind them, Julie and David agreed to let Sagon be brought up as a normal child, dealing with the usual day-to-day challenges. Unknown to Sagon's parents Sagon had begun to write a journal. Initially it was what a lot of

the school friends were doing but as Sagon got older and began to understand what had happened Sagon realised that life had provided something very unusual to record.

SAGON'S JOURNAL

I have decided to write a journal. Our teacher suggested it. Most of my classmates are doing it so here goes. I want to record the things that are happening to me so that anyone reading it will understand my life.

| *Dear Journal,*

I don't think I realised that I was different until year two. Mum told me that I went to kindergarten 4 hours a day from the age of three but I don't remember it. I once saw a picture of myself when small. I had fair hair and blue eyes and dimples. I seemed to be tall and strong. I was wearing loose trousers and a top. Later, I know we had some rows over clothes, I liked the frilly ones with bows and flowers but Mum didn't like them. She said that they were old-fashioned. Looking back I guess she didn't want to influence me one way or the other but I was already thinking like a girl.

I shall never forget the first term at the big school. Mum told me later that she had arranged to see the teacher to explain that I was different but it all got very confusing as

the teacher didn't understand and got very embarrassed. Mum said that the head teacher later called her to the office to discuss my application form. Apparently mum had left the section 'Gender' empty.

'I see you haven't filled in the sex of your child.' The Head had said.

'No,' my mother had replied. Realising that there may be some resistance, the teacher repeated,

'You do need to so we can make sure your child is happy.' *'I didn't because it is undecided.'*

'Undecided! How can it be undecided?' At that point my mother told me that she had shown the Head Mistress, the letter she had obtained from the specialist. The head apparently read it slowly and then stopped and said,

'I don't understand, a child is either a boy or a girl?'

My mother had replied,

'That may be so to you but my child is undecided and we are going to wait until Sagon decides that's all.' *I was happy that mum and dad had understood.*

I am now really dreading going to school. A kid in my class followed me into the boy's toilet and stood watching me as I waited to

go into a cubical. He must have listened because when I had finished he laughed,
‘You’re peeing like a girl sissy, sissy.’
I told mum I wouldn’t go back to that school ever again. I want to die. Why was I made like this? It’s not fair.

Later I overheard my parents arguing again about me. Dad was shouting,
‘We must do something I can’t bear leaving Sargon like this. Did you hear what happened at school yesterday, it’s tearing me apart?’ Then I heard him crying it was a terrible sound. Mum said nothing. Why don’t they help me, why have they left me to struggle like this It isn’t fair? I don’t know what to do. Someone please help me. I read somewhere that a girl cut herself because she hated herself so much. Sometimes I feel like doing that, to kill myself.

Dear Diary,

*I hate sport. I don’t like to play football.
Because I am tall I was put in the boys team.
I hate the roughness. I remember arguing
with the coach. He has such a closed mind.
‘Try.’ he said. ‘You can play; it’s just
a matter of practice.’*

*I played one or two games but got kicked
and came off the field feeling very bruised. In
the end he let me play with the girl’s team
and I was good, I can run very fast and avoid*

any contact. I am very popular and am always wanted for the team.

I am ten tomorrow and Mum has arranged a party and said I can invite five friends. I will ask my best friend Sally. She will help me choose the others. When I told mum who was coming she noticed that I hadn't invited any boys.

'Darling,' she said. 'I see that you haven't invited any boys, why is that?'
I said,

'I don't like the boys. They are too rough and they smell.'

My body was changing Mum told me it would. Strange things were beginning to happen. My shirts were becoming tight and I could see my nipples were growing. I haven't said anything to anybody but Mum must have noticed when I was in the shower. It was then that I was confused. I seemed to be a bit of each, a boy and a girl.

I have made friends with a girl called Emily we are the same age and in the same class. We try to have lunch together and have sleepovers. Yesterday I saw her looking at me in a funny way.

'Sagon,' she asked in a strained voice, 'can I asked you something?' I knew that sooner or later she would begin to wonder.

'Sure what's the problem?' I said, 'I feel silly asking you this. Please don't be upset, you know we are best friends.' I waited somehow I knew what was coming.

'Some of the class are asking, are you a boy or a girl?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'I seem to be a mixture.' She looked surprised and I did something I had never done before I pulled down my knickers and showed her. I could see her eyes getting wider as she looked at the confusion that I was.

'It's all right,' I said, 'don't be sad. I'm OK. Really I'm OK. Then I saw her swallow and she said,

'What are you going to do when you, you know, fall in love?'

'I don't know. I suppose I'll have to wait and see.'

Dear Diary,

I am becoming very shy about my body. I won't let anyone see me undressed, not even my mom. She noticed the locked bathroom door and my covering myself when she came into my bedroom. In the end I put a sign on my door, 'No entrance without a ticket' I thought it was funny but my parents didn't and we had the first big row.

It happened like many rows, without warning. We were all sitting down to

breakfast. I was in a hurry as I was late for school when my father said,

‘Sagon, why do you lock the bathroom door? It’s not safe. What if something happened to you we couldn’t get in to help you?’

‘Dad I’m in a hurry, please can we deal with this later.’

‘No I want to know now.’

I got angry,

‘I’m sorry dad I’m off,’ and I left. I had to go. I was late for my class.

When I got home from school, dad was waiting for me.

‘Look Sagon, I don’t want you to lock the bathroom door, do you understand; no one is going to disturb you. Just close it not lock it.’

‘Dad you don’t understand.’

‘Yes I do. I understand more than you realise.’

What did he mean? I was puzzled? Then I realised that he must know about my ‘problem’. We had never talked about it. I’ll wait till mum comes home and I’ll ask her.

‘Mum, Dad wants me to leave the bathroom door unlocked. I don’t want to. I don’t want anyone coming in when I’ve no clothes on.’

It all came to a head one day when mum said she wanted to talk to me. I've waited for this moment.

'Darling, she said, 'I think we need to talk.'

'What mum, what do you want to say?'

'When you were born...

'I know mum I was all mixed up and you didn't know what to do. Isn't that what happened?'

'Yes, we saw all sorts of people and were given different advice. One doctor wanted to operate on you but we didn't want that. No one really knew what we should do so we decided to do nothing. They thought that we should have done something, sorted it out there and then you wouldn't be in the difficulty you're in.'

|
Dear Diary,

I know they did the right thing. They let me decide. They had confidence in me and I love them for that. I know I'm the only one who can decide what I want to be. No matter what I hear different, it is my decision mine only. I think I now know, I want to be a girl. I am going to change my name to Sage. I'll ask them in the morning. So at breakfast I said that I wanted to change my name to Sage

Mum and Dad are wonderful. They just agreed without any argument. It was much easier than I thought it would be. Mum just said 'Darling, Dad and I will be happy whatever you decide we only wanted the best for you.'

'I know mum I know,' I said hugging them.

My life became much easier after that. I am now free to choose my own clothes and I will start to wear makeup. It was a bit strange at school one or two kids made remarks but my real friends just accepted the new me and soon even my new name was accepted. After a while no one made any remarks. I feel I now know who I am and so do all my friends and the teachers. It seemed that once I had decided what I wanted to be everything seemed to fall into place. A great weight has been lifted from me and I no longer think about what I am.

I got good grades and am going to college. I will be sharing a room with another girl who was born in India. I was still very shy about my body but although I didn't want to, I began to confide in her about my 'condition.' That's when I learned about transgender in Hinduism.

She told me about their belief in the duality of all people, that within each of us there is a

male and female person. When I told her about my condition she became very excited and said that I was very special as I represented that duality physically. It made me feel very happy at least there was someone who understood and wouldn't judge me.

My favourite subject is biology; I have a super teacher called Miss Macintosh. She is about Mum's age and is very patient with us, not getting irritated when I can't understand something. I suppose it's natural that I would be drawn to biology and medicine, they seemed to be the subjects that were the most likely to unlock the puzzle that I was. I had learned a lot about animals and the way some species are true hermaphrodites having both male and female parts that worked; then there were the species that could change their gender, they were the spookiest.

At the back of my mind there was a nagging question. Is it just nature that gets it wrong occasional or is there another reason, one that we need to address?

Dear Diary

High School is a real challenge. I meet so many young men who wanted to sleep with me and who can't understand why I seemed to be so shy and prim. I am not really. It's just that I haven't met the right guy

someone who will love me as I am and not be put off by my funny body.

Then it happened, in the most unlikely way. I was standing at a bus stop cowering from the rain waiting for my ride when this guy walks up to me. He leans over and says, 'Let's share my umbrella, you don't want to get your hair wet, do you?' It was the nicest offer I had had for days and I smiled. He turned out to be a lecturer at the neighbouring Uni, teaching biology. We got talking and talking. We had a lot in common especially our love of biology.

We were about to part when he said something, which excited me.

'Look Sage there's a talk in our Main hall next week that might interest you. One of the British representatives on the WHO study of EDC, the chemicals that they think are polluting the air the water and the soil, is talking about the changes that have occurred since the first report ten years ago.'

I wondered if it would be over my head but I didn't want to miss the chance and in any case I thought I could ask Stephen, that was his name, about anything I didn't understand so I said yes. I couldn't wait for the week to pass. I was so excited about the talk. It was going to be unlike anything I was studying, the speaker was

presenting the latest information and that was fascinating.

I told my parents about the talk but they didn't seem to be so interested. They were mainly concerned that I was safe. What I knew about Stephen seemed their biggest concern. I told them that he was a gentle man and they had no reason to be worried.

We arranged to meet in the foyer of the Lecture Hall. I arrived early and stood under the huge dome-like space watching as the audience arrived. They were all ages and from all disciplines, students mingled with faculty members all enjoying some free drinks before entering the hall. I saw Stephen arrive. He looked as if he had been rushing. I waved and he saw me.

'Come,' he said taking my elbow, 'we must get a good seat in the front there's going to be a big audience.' I followed him through the swing doors and entered the auditorium. It was flanked with banks of seats almost to the ceiling. I guessed it could have seated up to thousand people. We found some empty seats in the front and sat down. Stephen took out his I-pad, I assumed to take notes.

Gradually everyone settled into their seat and the hall quietened. There was an air of expectancy as the lights dimmed. A tall figure with a mop of white hair walked slowly onto the stage and stood behind the

lectern. He placed some notes down and then turned to the audience.

‘Good evening everyone, I would like to thank the faculty vice-chairman for inviting me to speak to you. I have some exciting news. I want to bring you up to date with the current evidence concerning the significance of EDC’s.’

‘Who is that?’ I whispered to Stephen.

‘He’s Professor Brian Uarvis, head of research at the National Fertility clinic Sussex.

The Professor was explaining,

‘For those of you not familiar with the eponym EDC, it stands for Endocrine Disruptor Chemicals; the endocrine system is the collection of glands in living creatures. These regulate metabolism, growth and development, tissue function, sexual function, reproduction, sleep, and mood, among other things. They are the essential controllers of all changes in living tissues.’

‘The Disruptors are chemicals that interfere with the endocrine systems and may cause diseases such as cancer. Ten years ago the WHO carried out a study to measure and assess the significance of these agents in the environment. They identified three strands and have now repeated it.

I want to share with you the comparison between now and ten years ago. Their key concerns at the time were:

1. That many endocrine diseases were on the increase,
2. That there are hundreds of chemicals in use by industry and the medical profession most of which can affect the endocrine system and very few of them have been investigated and
3. That laboratory studies have shown the harmful effects of EDCs on experiential animals.

The latest studies ten years later have shown that all these concerns have become more evident and what was thought of as not significant is now very significant.'

I listened carefully to what he was saying but got lost in the detail. At the end he answered many questions. One that made me prick up my ears was from a middle-aged woman who introduced herself as Dr Leiden, a psychologist. She asked the Professor whether he thought that the EDC's could affect the unborn child and cause intersex. There was a gasp in the audience. The professor who was leaning against the lectern suddenly stood upright, his head held alert. I could see him thinking and then with a smile he said,

'I suppose anything is possible but we don't know for certain.' He quickly went to

another questioner but the woman persisted and interrupted.

‘You mean Professor, it’s possible that the increasing frequency of indeterminate sexual organs at birth could be due to EDCs?’

By now I was listening intently.

‘I think it may be too soon to deduce that from the available evidence but conversely I don’t think that factor can be ruled out.

‘Professor!’ the woman said angrily, ‘why are you sitting on the fence? Why won’t you say what you know that all the evidence points to it being true?’

The Professor suddenly erupted,

‘Madam, I have nothing more to say on that matter, next question please.’

The hall went wild, people started to bang on the railings and whistle. A slow handclap began. I watched with amazement as the Professor was quickly bundled off the stage. Stephen suddenly said,

‘Let’s get out of here, there could be a riot.’ He grabbed my hand and we rushed into the foyer and out into the car park.

‘Phew! He said, ‘that was some talk. I’ve never seen an audience react in that way, they were really angry.’

I was confused.

'Why were they so angry? I thought the speaker seemed to answer the question to the best of his ability.' I said.

'Because,' Stephen explained, 'its very complicated. There are a number of chemicals used in Industry that have an oestrogen like effect such as the zeno-oestrogens, so its not just one chemical. But there is a feminine movement that is concerned that if it can be proved that EDCs i.e. the oestrogens are causing foetal abnormalities in man, most oral contraceptives would be banned and they might have to go back to the physical types of contraception. It's a real hot potato right now.'

We reached the car and opening my door, he said.

'I'll take you home.'

'No let's go and get a drink somewhere. I'm not ready to go home.' I'd like to talk more?'

We found a pub with a view over looking the valley and sat on a bench holding our drinks. He was quiet and thoughtful and then he asked me,

'I noticed you were very interested in that question about Intersex?'

Dear Diary

I knew that one day I would have to answer that question. I didn't know when or

how but now I am facing it. I have met a wonderful man called Stephen. I don't know if I can trust him with my secret? I hardly know him yet but I feel safe and comfortable with him. But I am not ready yet to tell him about myself so I made up a story.

'Yes,' I said. 'I had a friend at school about my age who was born with mixed up anatomy. We were very close. His parents had decided not to accept the conventional solutions of surgery and hormones and let him grow up. One day he realised that he wasn't a boy but a girl.'

I could feel Simon watching me. I began to feel hot and my face burning and then I began to cry. I couldn't help it; it was such a relief to talk about it. I had bottled it up for so long.

'Its all right,' he said holding me. 'It's OK, I understand. It's not your fault. It's nothing to do with you. You are a beautiful intelligent young woman.'

It was well after midnight when Stephen dropped me home and we kissed under the light on the doorstep. I let myself in. There was a light in the lounge; Dad was stretched out on the couch. He woke when I came in.

'Mum and I were a bit worried, did you have a nice evening? You look as if you did'

‘Dad I’ve met a wonderful man. He knows and it’s all right. I’m so happy.’

Dear Diary,

It’s has happened. I told Stephen and he was wonderful. He seemed to understand and didn’t seem to care. All he said was that I was beautiful. I am so happy at last I don’t need to hide.

The following day, there was a small piece in the local newspaper. *A riot nearly broke out in the University Lecture Hall last night. Professor Brian Uarvis was giving a talk about the significance of EDCs in drinking water. When questioned by a member of the audience, he refused to confirm that they had any association with the increasing incidence of Intersex,*

CHAPTER 7.

The annual meeting of the group Women 4 Contraception was winding up. I had gone with Simon as we had heard that they were campaigning to keep the mixed Pill despite the adverse evidence. We had just heard a talk from Dr Leiden on the ‘Psychological complications of Pregnancy’. I had recognised her as the woman who had

questioned the professor and we wanted to hear what she had to say. After the talk, there was a general hubbub of conversation before members left. I overheard a conversation.

‘What did you think of the talk?’ one member had said to another.

‘It was very interesting but I had hoped she would have talked about contraception I’m really confused.’

‘In what way?’

The other member replied.

‘Well they say that contraceptive pills are damaging the environment and may be the cause of birth defects in humans.’

I turned to look Stephen, he was scribbling furiously. He must have heard what was said because he just put up his palms in the air as if to say I don’t know.

‘Here we go again,’ I said. ‘Isn’t it about time we knew one way or the other?’

Dear Diary,

I now know what I want to do.

Someone needs to find the answer and why not me? The other issue that I wish to address was the place of people like me in society, but where to start? I know, I’ll write to the Professor who gave us the talk on

EDC's? I'll speak to mum and see what she says.

Mum says why not? He can only say no. Good old mum.

Dear Professor Brian Uarvis.

I am a final year Biology graduate. I heard your wonderful lecture on EDCs and would like to work with you.

I added some details about my grades at school etc.

I posted it, waited and continued with my studies. I had told Mum that I had written to the Professor but didn't expect a reply and had almost forgotten about it when a letter arrived. My mother had picked up the mail from the front hall and was rifling through it when she came upon mine.

I was still having breakfast when I heard her shout.

'Sage, there's a letter for you.' She was very excited,

'It has the Department of Health logo on the corner.'

Grabbing it I rushed upstairs to my room and sat on my bed. I propped it up on my pillow and stared at it trying to read its contents through the sealed envelope. I sat for some while plucking up courage to open it. I even imagined what it might say.

I then steeled myself to open it. It was very brief.

Dear Sage,

I would be delighted to meet you and discuss what you have in mind. Ring my secretary and make an appointment. Meanwhile please send me a brief CV.

Dear Diary,

I'm so excited I have got an interview with the professor. I must keep calm. I may not be successful. I mustn't get too excited. Keep calm.

I was over the moon. I reread it several times to make sure I had understood it and then waving it above my head. I bounded down the stairs.

'Mum and dad I've got an interview, I've got an interview.'

I was so excited I almost knocked mum down as she was coming up the stairs.

'That wonderful,' she said hanging onto the bannister to catch her breath. I handed the letter to her.

'Read it. I'm so thrilled.'

'They want you to come for interview. That's wonderful news.'

As the day approached I began to feel apprehensive, my heart beat too quickly and

I felt hot and cold. That morning I couldn't eat any breakfast. My initial confidence was fading fast.

What is he going to ask me? Do I know what I want to do? It was all very scary. Mum and dad were no help. Neither of them had any experience of this type of interview so I was on my own. The last thing mum said, as she wished me good luck was don't worry, do your best and if you don't get the job, there are always other jobs. If the money is poor, we will always support you until you get established and can become independent.

I was due to see the Professor at 10 am in his laboratory. I arrived 10 minutes early and went up to the receptionist.

'Can I help you miss?' she asked.

Yes I'm Sage. I have an appointment.'

'Ah yes the Professor is expecting you. I'll show you the way.'

The receptionist was very kind and I began to feel much calmer. I followed her up a flight of stairs. Then along a corridor until we stopped outside a door marked Professor Brian Uarvis. She tapped lightly. I heard a voice say 'come in'. She then whispered 'Good luck' and next I was in his office facing him. He took my hand and guided me to a chair.

‘Good morning Sage, did you have any difficulty finding the place?’

‘No the instructions I was sent were perfect.’

‘Good! First of all I am glad you liked my talk, it’s a difficult problem but we must solve it. Now tell me why do you want to work with me?’

I knew this question was coming and I had prepared a sort of answer.

‘Professor I think the work you are doing is of great importance for future generations and I wanted to be involved in it. I am interested in the nature of gender, what makes a man feel like a man and woman like a woman. Are there any chemical controllers and if so can they be corrupted?’

‘That’s a very thought-provoking question for someone so young. What made you interested?’

‘I have been reading about the animal world and know that some species can change their gender. We humans are very hung up about being male or female and I wondered why? I hope to graduate in October and am expected to get a 2.1. I am very used to dealing with animals and I am a fast learner.’

‘Tell me a little about yourself,’ he said.

'I am an only child. My parents are not academic. I read a lot and am challenged by so many questions that need answers.

'What do you do in your spare time?'
He asked.

'A close friend and I a girl, love to explore the woods near my home. We have seen the most amazing things, living creatures plants and insects all jostling for space, it's almost like a city.'

'Have you had any further thoughts about the problems I discussed in my talk?

'I have thought a lot about it,' I replied.
'Ideally we should stop the EDC's from getting into the drinking water. That would be the best solution but as that is unlikely to be possible for many years to come, we could clean the water of ADC's before drinking it.'

'Have you heard about any ways of doing that?'

I had read about a number of methods mainly based on filtering and oxidants.

He sat listening to me and then looking at his watch said,

'OK, I would like to invite you on a trial basis as an intern. We couldn't pay you anything but you can join the department and work in the different areas. How does that appeal to you?'

Dear Diary

I am a little disappointed that he hasn't wanted me as an assistant but at least I have my foot in the door.

CHAPTER 8

The next few weeks flew by. College lessons were very intense and I found myself studying from morning to night but I tried to get out at the weekend. I needed to clear my head to get away from studying for a few hours. It was on one of my walks that I bumped into Stephen.

'Hi Sage, I've tried to phone you.' He said.

'Sorry I've had my phone switched off. I've been studying.'

'How are you doing?'

'I'm fine. A bit stressed about the exams but otherwise OK. How are you?'

'I miss you, I miss your smile. I keep thinking about you. I want to get to know you better.'

I looked at him with surprise.

'Are you sure?'

Yes I am sure. I haven't been more sure about anything for ages,' he said taking my hand. We walked together in silence. I was aware of the warmth and strength of his grip and he the softness and lightness of mine. We hadn't walked far when we came upon a bench.

'Let's sit here for a while,' he suggested. We sat in silence. I was acutely aware of him. I felt safe and happy.

After a while I said,

'You know I decided to write to Professor Jarvis to ask him for a job in his lab.'

'Yes, did you hear from him?'

'Yes,' I said smiling.

'What did he say?'

'He offered me an internship after I pass my exams.'

'That's wonderful you must be very excited.'

'Yes I am. I want to get on with my work and didn't want to wait.'

'Your work what do you mean?'

'I have decided that nature didn't make me like this for no reason. I feel it's a sign I can't ignore.'

I knew it was important to do well in my exams and accepted that I would have to restrict seeing my friends. However Stephen was an exception, he offered to test me and we arranged to meet once a week for three hours, in the evening. When I told her mother, there was a look of doubt on her face.

'It's all right mum I know what I'm doing.'

I now knew what I wanted to do but wasn't clear how to do it. I realised that my age would be against me. I knew that Academia was not used to young women leading research but that's what I wanted to do, to use my experience and my problems as a springboard to change ideas and thinking, but where and how to start? Who did I know well enough to share my dreams, certainly not my parents much as I loved them?

Perhaps because we were now so close that I didn't think of him but Stephen was the obvious person to approach. We were due to meet at the weekend when I usually took some time away from my studies. As the days approached, I felt increasingly excited at the prospect of seeing him. I was realising that he was becoming a very important person in my life.

He was waiting at their usual bench when I arrived. There was a big smile on his face when we hugged.

'You look like a tabby cat that's just had a bowl of cream,' I exclaimed. 'What making you so happy?'

'You of course, seeing you. How are you, how are the studies going?'

'OK I suppose. I will be pleased when the exams are behind me,' I replied.

'Stephen listen, I know you will try to deter me but I want to search for the cause of my condition and others like it. I need you to

help me. I think being attached to the Professor is a start but where do I go from there?’

‘Sage I know you’re impatient to get going but from my experience nature gives up her secrets very reluctantly so it’s going to be a slow hard slog to make any impression. You must learn to curb your impatience. Take each step at a time.’ I listened but didn’t like what I heard. Why are researchers so pessimistic? I thought, but said nothing.

The Exams results came out and I had got a 2.1 and was over the moon. I phoned Stephen and arranged to meet him at our favourite bench. He was already there when I arrived. He got up and we hugged.

‘Well done,’ he said holding me at arm’s length. ‘Who’s a clever woman, now you can begin your life’s work.’

As soon as I could I contacted the laboratory and was told to come the following day. The professor was away but his assistant Joan Driffield a thoughtful woman in her early thirties met me. She showed me around the offices and the labs and then we went onto the top floor where the animal house was. I could smell the musty odour as I approached the facility. The animals all mice were kept in small cages placed at shoulder height, one

to a unit. They scurried around when I entered and then settled down. A young man was feeding them. He turned and smiled and I was introduced to him as Mike the animal keeper. I learned that his job was to feed the animals and clean out their cages when required. I would work with him supervising the research. Then I followed Joan to the laboratories where the real work was done. There I met Jonathan a PhD graduate who was researching the relationship between EDCs and animal disorders. This was the area that particularly interested me. As soon as I could I made his acquaintance. I had so many questions to ask him. The opportunity came over lunch when I manoeuvred to sit next to him. When there was a lull in the conversation I nabbed him,

Jonathan I began, 'I'm the new intern and would like to spend some time with you finding out exactly what you are researching.'

'Sure,' he said, 'it would be a pleasure I've always got an eye for a pretty girl.' I ignored his remark.

Once in his laboratory, he asked me,

'What particularly aspect of my work interests you?' I was a bit reluctant to blurt out my real interest, which was in human intersex so I quibbled and finally said,

'I'm interested in the relationship between EDCs and animal intersex.'

He looked surprised.,
What made you interested in that?’
‘I don’t know. It just seemed an
important subject which could have
widespread implications.’

CHAPTER 9

It was still dark when I woke to the ringing of my alarm on the first day of my new job at the laboratory. I blinked as the light from my bedside lamp lit up the room. I surveyed it. Somehow it had changed. It was no longer the room of a child. I was no longer a child. I felt I was on a mission and today was the first step to achieve my ambition. I showered and dressed quickly. Grabbing an apple from the bowl in the kitchen I let myself out into the cold morning air, stifling a shiver. My car an old mini coughed into life and I slipped out of the drive towards the Laboratory. Mike was already in the animal house when I let myself in. I grunted morning and put on my white apron. For a moment I watched him as he opened the cages, cleared out the droppings, renewed the water and put out some pellets into the feeding bowls.

I checked my notes. Today the experiment was due to start. The mice had already been divided into separated groups ready for their separate diets. But already I could see a snag. Mike had either forgotten

or hadn't understood the plan because he had already fed both groups with the same water and pellets.

I waited until he had finished and then called him,

'Mike wasn't it today that we were due to start the experiment?' He nodded and then swore.

'Damn I forgot it was today, what should we do?'

'We'll start tomorrow. Don't forget the two groups have to be fed completely different diets including different water.'

I suddenly realised that all the water and food we had available would be contaminated with the EDCs, which we were trying to evaluate. I needed to devise a different strategy.

It was then that I began an Internet search to identify food and water supplies free of EDCs but was frustrated by the lack of information. After many hours of fruitless searching I gave up and booked an appointment with the Professor. It was late afternoon when he was free to see me and they arranged to meet in his lab. The professor was in a white coat with a mask and a cap when I entered the room. Immediately I was asked to don the same protective clothing.

‘Good afternoon Sage how are you settling in?’

‘OK sir but frustrated by my inability to find a EDC free diet for the control group of mice.’

‘I wondered how soon you would run up against that problem.’

‘Can you help me?’

‘It’s not easy. In fact I don’t think there is any commercial sources. I think you will have to start at the beginning and grow your own!’

Chapter 10

Stephen and I moved in together. It had all happened suddenly. We were taking their Sunday walk as usual by the river when Stephen stopped by a bench.

‘Let’s sit here for a while there is something on my mind.’ We sat in silence for a while. I was wondering what he was going to say when he suddenly turned to me and kissed me.

‘What was that for?’ I asked surprised.

‘It was to tell you that I love you and want you to come and live with me.’

‘Stephen we’ve been through this. You know how I feel. I love you but it’s not fair to you to have someone like me who can’t you know? It’s not fair to you.’

‘What can I say to convince you that I understand but it makes no difference?’

‘You say that now but as time goes on you will hate me or go and find someone behind my back.’

He shook his head.

‘Can’t we have a try you know, like a trial marriage. Either of us can withdraw if its not working. What do you say?’

I sat looking at the water seeing the small ripples on the surface as the wind scurried around.

‘When do you want to start?’ I said finally.

‘Now,’ he replied triumphantly. ‘Now,’ and he leaned over and kissed me.

‘I’m home,’ shouted Stephen as he let himself into our small flat. ‘Hi anyone home?’ he repeated.

‘Yeah I’m in the kitchen preparing supper.’ I called out.

‘Are you all right? You sound a bit fed up,’ he said coming into the kitchen

‘I’m OK I suppose but am really frustrated. I just can’t get going with my research. The water and food contamination has got me stumped.’

‘Look lets make a change, why don’t we go out to eat?’

‘OK I’ll just put this food in the fridge and do my face. I won’t be long.’ We went to

our regular haunt and sat at the bar. I ordered a coke and Simon ordered a Gin and tonic. He was idly stirring the ice clinking in his glass when he suddenly had a flash, a ridiculous idea. Earlier that day he had heard on the news that the glaciers in Iceland comprised almost half the world's fresh water. That was nothing surprising but what interested him was how old some of them were. It was while he was watching the ice cubes melt in his G & T that it happened.

'Sage, I think I have the answer to your research. I think I know how you can get pure water, water without any EDCs. Sage looked up from staring into her coke.

'You do? How? That would be fantastic, but you know there isn't any.'

'But there is.'

'How do you mean?'

'Glaciers!'

'Glaciers? I don't understand.'

'Listen, the Icelandic glaciers started forming many thousands of years ago long before man was contaminating the water.'

'Yes OK, but I don't see what you're getting at?'

'Wait! Now they are hundreds of metres thick. As a result of climate change they are melting. It's the ice at the base that is melting. It's the oldest ice in the world and therefor the purist.'

I looked puzzled.

‘Don’t you see the water melting from the base will be the oldest, thousands of year old. It fell as rain long before man started to use chemicals of any sort. He was probably still using bows and arrows. It’s going to have no EDC’s don’t you see? You can collect it and use it in your experiments.’

At last we had a breakthrough. I could at last develop my control group of mice, mice that were fed on fluids free from any trace of EDCs. Now we needed to find a company who would be prepared to develop food pellets made with EDC free water.

So the first step was to locate a reliable source of pure water I discussed my plan with Stephen. He listened intently.

He knew that the glaciers and ice caps of Iceland cover more than 10% of the countries more than 100,000 square kilometres. Many have volcanoes beneath them. He had read that under the ice cap of Vatnajökull lie two volcanoes, Grimsvotn and Baroarbunga. When a volcano erupted under the glacier, the resultant meltwater could lead to a sudden outburst flood producing a glacial lake.

‘I’ll go to Iceland to the International Glacial Society to find how best to collect the glacial out flow.’ He told me.

The following morning he was at Luton Airport waiting for the EasyJet flight to Iceland. It was about a two-hour flight to Keflavik International Airport where he was to be met by Professor Rut Kjarta from the Geophysics Department of the Meteorological Office and Chairman of the International Glaciological Society of Iceland. They had arranged to meet at the EasyJet counter. Stephen arrived early and was waiting when he saw a tall fair-haired man with broad shoulders walking leisurely towards him. He recognised him from his photo, high cheekbones and deep blue eyes.

‘Professor Kjarta?’ he asked

‘Yes.’

‘Professor Chambers?’ He said with a perfect English accent. The two men shook hands.

‘Welcome to Iceland, is this your first visit?’

‘Yes, but I hope it won’t be my last.’

‘My car is just outside; let me take your bag. You will be staying at my home if that’s OK.’

‘Wonderful I can’t wait to meet your family.’

‘My wife died three year ago but my daughter Helga will look after us.’

‘I’m sorry I didn’t know.’

‘Let’s go to the office and we can discuss your plans.’

His office was in a modern glass faced building with the winter sun shimmering off it. Inside it was open plan with a cool breeze coming from the AC. Stephen followed the Professor as he bounded up the stairs into his office.

‘We can talk here,’ he said offering Stephen a seat.

‘Tea coffee?’

‘Coffee, milk no sugar. Rut rang a bell and his secretary appeared.

‘Kaffe fyrir tvo mjólk án sykurs,’ he said. She was stunning, tall and slender with pale long straight hair, chiselled features and blue eyes. She was wearing a short closely fitted skirt, which showed off her long legs. Stephen found himself following her out with his eyes.

‘Falleg eh?’ said Rut smiling, ‘beautiful’ Stephen realised that almost all pure Icelanders had blue eyes.

‘I’ve read your letter; it’s an unusual request. I have not had one like that before.

‘Is it feasible?’

‘Yes I don’t see why not. We would have to set up a collecting system at the base of a glacier. There could be a technical difficulty as glaciers move slowly so our system would have to be on the side away from the movement. Leave it to me I’ll let you have some details in the morning meanwhile

I have asked Angelika to entertain you. She knows Reykjavik well.'

The following day Stephen met Angelika at the National Museum of Iceland. They met on the front steps of a large three-storey building standing alone in its own grounds.

'What would you like to see?' she asked as they entered the large auditorium? There was a big sign pointing to an exhibition 'The story of Iceland's past.'

'That looks interesting,' he said

'OK let go there, it is fascinating I know you'll enjoy it.'

Stephen learned that Celtic monks first occupied the islands in the 7-8th C. By the year 1000 when Christianity was adopted there were estimated to be 30,000 – 40,000 occupants. The well-known Icelandic Sagas were written in the 12th C. The bible arrived in Icelandic in 1600. There were so many interesting facts about such a small country, which even by the year 2000 had only 300,000 residents.

Stephen had arranged to meet Rut for lunch. He was waiting for him.

'Let's eat at a typical Icelandic restaurant. After lunch I have organised a flight over the Vatnajökull to show you the water run off where we would build the collecting station.'

Lunch was very simple, parsnip soup, a specialty, followed by Halibut with salad. They almost lost sight of time when Rut looked at his watch.

‘We must hurry otherwise we will miss our flight.’ They arrived at Keflavik International Airport just in time to catch the Eagle Air flight to Vatnajokull.

Standing on the tarmac was a small fixed wing single engine plane with a pilot. They would be the only passengers. Stephen had never flown in such a small plane and for a while he hung on to his seat as it rocked and tipped in the wind. But once they were over the glacier he was spellbound as they flew over thousand of meters of sheet ice some smooth like playing fields; elsewhere rucked with deep crevasses or thrown up like castles climbing into the air. As the sun shone though the ice, it appeared a deep blue as if reflecting the clearest sky. Steadily they flew nearer to the leading edge where streams and pools of water could be seen emerging from the melting ice.

‘That’s where we will set up our collecting tanks,’ Rut said pointing to the leading edge, ‘so as to capture the purist water. What do you think?’

‘That’s perfect.’ Steven couldn’t have been happier with the plan and he knew that I would endorse his opinion.

Meanwhile I had taken on the task of approaching Labdiet the largest animal feed producing company in the world. They were based in St Louis Missouri. I decided to use a personal approach.

‘Hello may I speak to your CEO Marshall Benedict?’

‘I am his Secretary, can you tell me what it is about?’

‘Yes I am Professor Evans from the Sussex Fertility Laboratories in the UK. I need a very specialised feed for my experimental mice. It has to be made using pure water, which I am currently sourcing from Iceland.

‘OK Professor, if you give me your contact details I will get Mr Benedict or his assistant to contact you.’

Several days later the CEO rang me.

‘This is Marshall Benedict. I understand that you want a very special feed for your experimental mice. Labdiet is the world’s largest producers of specialist animal feeds. Please send me precise details and we will let you know whether we can fulfil your needs.’

Some month later, the first batch of the specialised Mouse diet made with glacial water arrived at the Laboratory.

By this time I had assembled the research team together and outlined the project.

‘Jonathan I want you to be in overall control with you Mike working under him. We have a lot of work to do. Firstly we have to breed two genetically identical strains of mice. One will act as the control, we will call that Group A and the other our experimental group, we will call Group B.’

‘We need a minimum of one hundred animals in each group so it will take us some while to achieve that. Now the important part, Group A will be fed a normal diet using standard pellets and tap water. Group B will be fed the special ADC free pellets and glacier water. We will record the incidence of intersex in the offspring of both groups. We will only use normally developed mice at every stage.’

I anticipate that it will take about five years for the results to be significant.

It was almost five years later when the audience was being seated at the Royal Society of Medicine in London. The hall hushed as the President walked onto the platform.

‘Ladies and Gentlemen tonight we are privileged to have as our speaker Professor Adams who will present the preliminary

results of her trial of feeding a normal versus ADC free diet to experimental mice.

‘Mr President and Fellows, it is a singular honour for me to present to you the early results of our linear study in mice of the effects of EDCs on foetal abnormalities such as mixed gender and a variety of intermediate forms. These variations have always been considered to occur by chance but with the increasing frequency of these findings in humans, we began to look at possible causes. The study is by no means complete but the results have been so startling that we felt we should make them available to the profession. The lights dimmed a slide was projected onto the screen. As you can see the EDC group had a three-fold increase in these foetal abnormalities compared to the control group. There was an audible intake of breath from the audience. The study has a further two years to run but we do not think that these preliminary results will alter. No sooner had I stopped talking than a hand shot up in the audience.

‘Yes Professor Michigan?’

I recognised him as a critic of my work.’

‘Professor Evans, What if we do not find a way of making water safe?’

‘Then Professor, the human species as we know it is doomed.’

The research was going well but I was not at peace. One evening when Stephen got home he could see from my red eyes that I had been crying.

‘What is it my love?’ He asked.

‘Its nothing I’m just feeling low.’ I didn’t want to tell him the truth but he would not let it be.

‘Sage you must talk please. I can’t bear seeing you unhappy and not telling me about it.’

It was some hours later while we were in bed that I began to talk.

‘When I agreed to live with you, I had accepted my body and thought that our work together would satisfy me; that I would be able to forget about it but it hasn’t happened. The other day I was doing my regular run around the pond and stopped at our bench to catch my breath. Seated nearby on the grass was a small family, a man, a woman and a small child a few weeks old gurgling and cooing on a blanket.’

‘I can’t tell you how I felt. I was almost sick with envy. It was a terrible feeling. I wanted to grab the child and run away with it. I managed to tear myself away and ran on. I then stopped and fell on the ground sobbing my heart out. I felt so ashamed. I’m a grown women but I completely lost control.’

'Why, why? I kept shouting. What have I done to be so damned?' Stephen could see me shaking with frustration. He moved towards me and held me, not interrupting until my rage had subsided.

'Darling Sage don't punish yourself so much. What you felt was natural and normal. Of course you feel cheated. You did nothing to cause your condition and it must feel like a curse has been put on you. It's natural to want a baby. I want a baby but I have accepted that we can't.'

A few days later Stephen came rushing into the kitchen. I was standing by the sink.

'I was thinking, didn't the specialist say that you have ovaries but no womb?'

'I think so,' I said, 'it's a long time since I was examined. What's got you so excited?'

'Well if you have ovaries and they are ovulating then we could go in for in vivo fertilisation.'

'And?'

'Surrogacy!' Stephen you're brilliant why didn't I think of that?'

It was about a week later that the results came through. Stephen's sperm were fine and I had eggs that could be activated. So we decided to go for it. But who would

surrogate for me? That turned out to be easier than I thought. I was discussing it in the cafeteria with one or two female colleagues when Susanna my secretary followed me out of the room into the toilet. She began the conversation.

‘Sage you were talking in general about surrogacy in the canteen. I wondered what you had in mind?’

I looked at her. What was she hinting? Dare I raise the subject? I waited and could see that Susanna was serious.

I began.

‘Well as you know Susanna, I don’t have a uterus.’

I had been open with everyone. I didn’t want someone to make snide remarks behind my back so I decided to come clean and up front.

‘Stephen and I want to have a baby. We are looking for a surrogate.’

‘Well,’ she said with a smile. ‘Look no further you have found one.’

‘You can’t mean it?’

It was like a dream come true

‘You do know what it involves?’

‘Yes I have a friend who did it and she still talks about the pleasure she gave the young couple who couldn’t have a baby. I know what it involves and I want to do it for you and Stephen.’

I couldn't contain myself. At last we could look forwards to having our own child even if it was carried in someone else's womb.

Suddenly I was involved in a round of hospital visits culminating in the harvesting of my eggs. It was easier than I expected. A few days before the procedure I was given some hormones to stimulate ovulation. On the day, I was sedated and while asleep a needle was inserted into one of the balloon-like follicles containing my eggs. These were drawn into the syringe and placed in a special medium prior to fertilisation.

Stephen's sperm had already been obtained and the two were mixed together. Within a few hours a sperm would have penetrated the egg and fertilisation would have begun. Meanwhile Suzanne was ready to receive the fertilised egg, which was placed in her womb made ready by a cocktail of hormones. Suzanne returned home and to her normal life at the laboratory.

Suzanne and I met the following day. I couldn't wait to find out how it went. Suzanne greeted me as usual and went to her desk. I followed her puzzled. I had expected some comment, some remark but she said nothing. Unable to bear the suspense, I asked,

'Well, well?

'Well what?' She replied acting as if nothing had happened. 'Tell me, tell me how did it go?'

'OK I s'pose,' said Suzanne and then she smiled and hugged me. 'It went well everything was normal and I feel fine.'

'Oh good I'm so relieved!'

The days leading up to the birth of the baby were tinged with anxiety. It was as if I was reliving the days before my own birth but now I knew the risk, the possibility of history repeating itself. I knew the statistics, one in 2000 but did that apply to a child from an intersex mother. Were my eggs in some one tainted? No one knew. There were no figures. I was sailing alone in the dark.

Day by day Stephen could see my fear mounting. It was evident from her drawn features and short temper. He sensed that the question that was repeated time and time again in my mind was, what if? But there was no answer no one could reassure me. I waited as the days dragged by. When will it be born? Will it be normal? I kept asking herself.

Stephen tried to discuss the worst scenario, that our baby was intersex.

'How would you deal with it?' he asked.

‘I don’t want to think about it,’ I shouted. ‘I just want a healthy baby, like everyone else. Why not me, us? Don’t we deserve the same as everyone else?’

Stephen refrained from discussing the commoner problems of childbirth. I was not in any mind to think about those more possible issues.

Every day I spoke to Suzanna.

‘Hi, how are you?’

‘Fine it won’t be long now,’ replied Suzanna.

‘Have you had the scan?’

‘Yes I’m waiting for the result. It might say whether it’s a boy or a girl.’

My heart dropped. It’s always the same, the same question boy or girl, not is it healthy? I suppose I’m paranoid about it. I must try to be like everyone else and somehow put my ‘condition’ aside.

‘I’ll let you know when the result comes through,’ Suzanna added.

‘Thanks’, I said.

I was unsettled as I continued to work in the lab on the project. The challenge now was to make sure that the two experimental groups remained distinct without any cross contamination. But my mind was elsewhere, waiting for the call from Suzanna. Every time

the phone rang, I would freeze. This time it was Stephen. He sensed my mood.

‘Are you OK?’

‘Yes,’ I said. Stephen was about to say something then decided not to.

‘Ok see you tonight, love you.’

‘Love you.’ I repeated mechanically. Just after lunch the phone rang again.

‘It’s for you Sage.’

‘I’ll take it in my office.’ She needed to be alone with no one overhearing the call.

‘Hi Sage it’s Suzanna. I’ve got the result. Everything’s fine but they can’t tell the sex yet. How are you? I guess a bit unsettled by it all.’

‘No more than you I’m sure.’

‘No I’m good, relaxed, calm almost enjoying it. I can’t wait to see our baby.’

Suzanna hadn’t yet asked me whether I wanted her to be present at the birth. Most mothers to be would, but she knew that I was in a different place. She wondered whether I might prefer to be phoned and told all is OK before visiting.

She decided to ask Stephen he’d know what to do.

But Stephen wasn’t certain.

‘Maybe she would like you to be there I don’t know. She’s in a very funny mood at the moment swinging from joy to sadness from day to day,’ he said.

Chapter 11

I was beginning to dread meeting our new baby. I was having terrifying dreams in which I saw a small infant suddenly transformed into a monster. It was as if I still hadn't fully accepted my own ambiguity and felt I needed to apologise for it.

It was a quite different view to my public face where I lauded my difference whenever the occasion allowed.

Stephen would be wakened by my groaning and thrashing, unable to understand and impotent to help. Time and again he would ask me. What is it? What is causing you such anguish? But my guilt prevented me from sharing my doubts with him. Repeatedly he would raise the subject of the new addition to our family expressing his anticipation, his excitement but I always dampened his enthusiasm.

'Please Stephen don't get too excited. Let's wait and see.'

Stephen increasingly frustrated by my attitude would slink away to his room sit in his favorite chair, and stare at the ceiling trying to understand. One evening as he was struggling with the dilemma he had a sudden flash of insight. Could it be? Yes it must be. How could I have forgotten? He then

remembered my greatest fear. I had said it so many times in the past when we had had no intention of having a family.

I would begin,

‘What if the baby?’ And I would stop the words gagging in my throat unable to force them out. He had made light of my fears quoting statistics. I would nod and the subject would be dropped. But later when walking in the park he would see me looking into the passing prams smiling at the babies and congratulating the mothers. It seemed such a natural thing to do.

But was there another reason that I was frightened. It was a deep and unresolved fear that I couldn’t talk about not even to Stephen. I wrapped myself in my work coming home exhausted and just flopping into bed. We rarely had any physical contact and when he approached me I would make some excuse that I was tired or had a headache. Stephen was excluded. Every time he tried to raise the subject I turned away. Our relationship drifted apart and we seemed like two strangers sharing the same home.

It had all come to a head when the doctor had advised Suzanna to have a scan, a routine scan to check that all was well. To me it seemed like a death sentence. At first when it was suggested I dismissed it as being unnecessary. After all I argued most

pregnancies happened without a scan. Also I knew in my heart of hearts that a scan might not allay my fears. So I had resisted it until Stephen insisted. We had a terrible row the worst we have ever had.

Stephen tried to keep calm and argue logically.

‘Please Sage, its not your decision. It’s up to Suzanne and the doctors. Trust them to make the right decision. You don’t need to know the result I will deal with it.’

‘That’s stupid,’ I said, ‘having a scan and not knowing the result, that makes no sense.’

The scan was reported as normal but that didn’t answer the question on my lips. I knew that scans didn’t always show the gender particularly if the baby is a girl. Obviously if you see a penis it is assumed the baby is a boy but I knew better. An enlarged clitoris could look like a penis. My doubts continued.

There was now three months to go and Suzanna was on maternity leave. I was like a caged animal.

‘Stephen I know I am behaving illogically but I can’t help it. I am in such a dilemma. I so want our baby to be normal but at the same time I am fighting for the rights of intersex children to be treated as normal. I am in such a quandary.’

Stephen was prepared and listened patiently. He repeated the same thing every time this subject came up.

‘Whatever our baby is, we will love it as much no matter what.’

Stephen and I had hoped that our child would be born before our trip but it wasn't to be, so with mixed feelings of excitement and sorrow we travelled to Stockholm to receive the Nobel Prize for Medicine. We were amongst three others laureates receiving prizes. The ceremony was held on the 10th December, the Anniversary of Alfred Nobel death in the Stockholm Concert hall, in the presence of their Royal Highnesses, the King and Queen of Sweden. The Chairman gave a brief history of the awards now the most prestigious in the world and acknowledged the foresight and generosity of Alfred Nobel who died in 1833. I received the diploma and medal on behalf of Stephen and myself and gave the following speech.

‘Your Royal Highnesses, Members of the Swedish Parliament, honoured Laureates, Ladies and Gentlemen. It is with the greatest of pleasure that I on behalf on my colleague Professor Chambers and myself humbly accept the shared 2155 Nobel Prize for Medicine. Many

of you will know that it was a personal problem, which set me on this path. In my journey I had the good fortune to meet and join with my husband and co-researcher Prof Chambers without whose constant assistance and support our work would not have happened.

Water is arguably the most important substance on this planet earth. In fact it is the one compound that supports life, as we know it. Unlike the fossil fuels of coal, oil, gas, and the air, all needed by man, water is the only substance that remains unchanged and therefore theoretically can never be used up. But it has the disadvantage that it is a ready solvent for many substances that are noxious to living organisms including man. The stimulus to our work was the increasing incidence of serious developmental problems in man and other species. We believe that our research has shown definitely that EDCs and other chemicals in the water are the cause. We have taken the first step by defining the problem. Now we need to find a solution, a way of reducing and in time eliminating all harmful chemicals from the water of the world. This will require the combined efforts of some of the greatest minds in the world together with the support of Organisations such as the World Health Organisation. Together I am convinced that this scourge to

mankind will be solved and that the world can look forward to a new and brighter future.

That night we attended a grand Banquet at which the King and Queen of Sweden were guests of honour. Representatives of the Swedish Government and Parliament were also present. It was while we were dining that Steven's mobile flashed a message.

'Please ring Suzanne'.

He turned to me and showed me the message; suddenly in the midst of the celebrations I felt a cold shudder.

'Ring her please,' I said.

'Now?' he replied.

'Yes now.'

He leaned forward so as to be less visible and dialled the number. I was just able to hear the reply.

'This is Suzanne speaking I have just been delivered of a beautiful baby girl'.

I waited unable to breathe.

'She is perfect in every way She will be waiting for you on your return'.

Our neighbour at the table must have heard the news. He stood up tapped his glass and announced,

'Friends, Professor and Mrs Chambers have just been told that they have a beautiful baby girl'.

I shall never forget the reception that we got. The whole company stood and drank a toast to our baby 'Good Health'

This, the most prestigious science award in the world received worldwide coverage from press, radio and television and we returned home to a rapturous reception.

Waiting for us at the airport was Suzanne. She handed Stephen and me her newborn baby. We had already selected a name, Pelia meaning 'a gift from God'.

That night as the sun slowly set on an amazing week I wrote in my diary:

Today Stephen and I met our beautiful baby girl. She is perfect in every way. The tests which I needed to have showed that everything was in place. The shadow that has hung over me for so long has vanished.

PYGMALION REVISITED A Novella

A modern Pygmalion, Mary alias Salome a prostitute is saved from jail by Sofia a Lawyer who was herself on the street, The story traces Mary's tutoring until she meets another girl Amber from a wealthy family who has gone off the rails. The two

young women share a lot in common. Each in their way was neglected from birth. The reader travels with the two women as they find themselves.

In downtown LA at the Los Angeles Criminal Court, the judge, Mrs Judy O'Hara was inviting the prosecution to sum up the case against an 18-year old Afro-American woman accused of soliciting for gain.

'Are you ready?' the judge asked the prosecuting lawyer.

'Yes your honour.'

A tall fair-haired man in his mid forties stood up. He was wearing a dark blue suit with a red rose in his lapel. He had a crew cut, which made him look more like a football player than a lawyer.

'Your Honour,' he began. 'The case is a simple one; the accused Salome Bridges was arrested by the police for soliciting on Main Street. This is the fourth occasion she has been detained. Previously she has been cautioned but in view of her persistence the police had no choice but to charge her. We have produced witnesses who have identified her.'

'Thank you, will Miss Sofia please present her case for the defence.'

A slim Afro-American woman wearing a dark tailored suit walked to the centre of the court, turned to face the jury and stood motionless for a moment. There was a distinct frisson in the air.

She waited, slowly eying each member of the Jury in turn. The court went quiet; all eyes were on her. She began almost caressing the words.

‘Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury, you have heard the charges against my client and the eyewitness accounts. They are all true.’

There was an audible intake of air from the onlookers waiting for her to continue.

‘What you have heard is the desperate lengths my client has gone to stay alive. What you have not been told is her story.’

Turning to look at the judge she pointed at the accused sitting in the witness box fidgeting with her hair and began.

‘The child you see here was the unwanted daughter of an unmarried drug-addict mother, who was unable to care for her. At the age of three she was placed in a home. A local family adopted her when she was four but her adoptee father molested her. After several years of abuse, she was taken back into the home and remained

there until she was fifteen. Knowing that she would be thrown out at sixteen she decided to run away with another girl and the two lived on the street. Later a man alleging to be her friend found a home for her but he began to exploit her. She had no ID, no money and was trapped so that she was unable to notify the police. Eventually she escaped and lived with another girl. By that time she had no means of support. She approached the social but was rejected and was forced to go on the street.'

'Your Honour, we are living in arguably the most advanced and wealthy country in the world. We have a constitution of which we are proud. It shouts loudly that all men,' she paused and continued.

'And all women are born equal and that they have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.'

'Was this girl born equal? Did the state provide her with the trappings of equality so that she could enjoy 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness?'

'No! To this young vulnerable woman these mighty words were empty promises. They had no place in her miserable life. From the moment she was born she was despised, a leper to society, to be discarded, to be ignored and to be exploited. She survived by using the only means that she had been provided with, namely her body.'

‘Your honour, is she a criminal or is she the victim of a system which fails so many of our young women?’

In the audience a woman turned to her neighbour,

‘Isn’t that the Sofia who used to be a prostitute?’

‘Yes, but she has turned her life around. Her story would make a great movie.’

As the defence counsel completed her case, the audience, which had remained silent stunned by her oration, stood up as one and cheered. The Court Officer repeatedly called,

‘Silence, silence,’ but his words were drowned in the tumult of emotion that rose in the court. After the excitement had died down, the jury retired.

In the jury room there was an air of high-spiritedness. The Foreman, a retired fireman was trying to restore order.

‘Order, order,’ he shouted until the tumult died down. ‘Please ladies and gentlemen, I know we have all been electrified by the summing up of the defence but now we need cool heads to decide the verdict. Who would like to begin the discussion?’

A man not yet in his forties thin and unshaven stood up.

'Mr Chairman, I know what the accused has suffered. I know what depths of despair she has felt. I know the loneliness she has undergone, struggling to find a meaning to life. I say the state is guilty not her.' No sooner had he sat down than a woman in her early fifties with dyed blonde hair and too much make up stood up.

'Mr Chairman,' she said with a Southern accent. 'I agree, I know the sort of background the accused came from. It was a world of despair and helplessness, I say not guilty.'

'Here, here,' came a chorus of voices.

'I think we may have a verdict,' said the chairman. 'Will all those who think the accused is guilty raise a hand?' No one moved. The ten members sat not reacting.

Ten minutes later, the chairman handed a piece of paper to the clerk who took it to the judge. She read it, nodded and said,

'Will the spokesman please give your verdict?'

'Not Guilty.'

The court exploded with excitement people were crying, some were clapping, others stamping their feet on the floor to show their approval of the verdict.

As the clamour died down, the young woman now free, walked over to her barrister and thanked her.

‘It was an honour to defend you,’ said Sofia. ‘Come and see me at my chambers, I may have a proposal that will change your life.’

Sofia always started the day early, arriving at her office before six just as dawn was breaking. She liked the empty roads and the solitude of the office before the hubbub of the day began. On the Monday after the case, she was startled to see the girl standing in the shadows outside her building.

‘What are you doing here, you gave me a shock?’

‘Miss, you told me to be here didn’t you, in that courtroom?’

‘Yes but I didn’t expect you just to turn up.’

‘Here I am.’

‘Ok let me open the door and you can follow me in.’ Sofia switched on the office light and turned to the girl. She tried to control the look of disapproval she felt when she saw her appearance. She was wearing a see through blouse over a black bra, a short tight skirt and bright red high-heeled shoes. But it was her face that she couldn’t

take her eyes off. She counted ten rings, three in each ear, one in each eyebrow, one in her lip and one in her tongue. Her head was shaved.

'You want my help?' said Sofia trying not to stare.

'Yeah you offered didn't you?'

'Yes I did. But you look different.'

'Yeah my probation officer told me to dress simple for the court but now I can be myself.'

'I see.'

Sofia was dumbstruck. How was she going to explain that what she called being herself was not going to work? She looked like a prostitute, the very thing she said she wanted to change.

'Why do you want to change your life?' She began.

'Because it's hell, you've no idea what it's like.'

Sofia listened. Should she tell her that she did, that she had been in the same hell? Perhaps it was too soon.

'Where are you living?'

'I live with another girl. We met in the correction facility.'

'Before I accept you, I need to know one thing, are you prepared to be guided by me no matter what? The girl looked surprised.

'I don't know what you are talking about?' she said.

'OK. You say you want to change your life.'

'Yes ma'am.'

'OK let's start. I want all the rings out now. By the way what is your real name?'

'Mary O'Connor, but I don't like it.'

'OK Mary get going, I want all the rings out.' At first Mary didn't move but then she realised that Sofia was serious and she began to remove them one by one. After a few minutes there was a small pile of rings on the table.

'Any more?' Sofia asked.

'Open your mouth.'

She could see a ring through Mary's tongue.

'Remove it please.'

'Next we need to find you some clothes.'

'What's wrong with my things? I wore them especially for you.'

'I'm sure you did but they are no good for work.'

After a long tiring trek through the department stores, Mary had two sets of acceptable clothing, neat professional and discrete. When they got home Sofia asked her to try them on. Mary struggled to oblige. She looked so different.

'What do think?' Sofia asked her as Mary peered at herself in the mirror.

'It ain't me miss,' she finally said.

'Even my Ma wouldn't recognise me.'

'That's what I want. Now this may be the most difficult part of your makeover.' You must learn to change the way you speak when you work.'

'What's wrong with the way I speak?'

'Everything! The moment you open your mouth, you tell the world you're uneducated and nobody is going to trust you.'

'But I've always spoke like this.'

Mary moved into the spare room and Sofia gave her a list of do's and don'ts knowing that she would not be able to follow most of them. She took her around her apartment showing her all the things she thought she would need to know. Her eating habits were a challenge; all she wanted was French fries and bread. Sofia struggled to get her to eat fruit and vegetables. It took some days for Mary to get used to using a knife and fork properly.

'God made my hands for eating so why not use them?'

Sofia decided that at the beginning Mary should shadow her, just be with her and watch what she did and listen. It wasn't long

before Sofia could see that Mary was bored. She decided to try something different.

‘Sit down at this desk. I’ll get you some paper and I want you to write your life story. A page will do,’ She added. Mary accepted the task and Sofia left her to it. She came back after half an hour and glanced over Mary’s shoulder. Her writing was large and child like, her spelling atrocious.

‘Did you go to school?’

‘Yeah but I never did the work. After a while they left me alone.’

It was going to be a bigger task than Sofia thought. Mary was going to have to learn to read and write before she could begin studying anything.

Over breakfast she discussed it with Mary.

‘I think we have a problem. You are illiterate. There was no other way to say it.’

Mary stopped eating and looked at her.

‘Illiterate? What does you mean?’

‘It means that you are unable to read or write.’

Mary choked.

‘I know I know,’ she replied her voice cracking. ‘It ain’t my fault. I always knew. I never had time. Please can you do something about it, can you help me?’

‘Yes I think I can,’ said Sofia smiling.

‘I have a solution. I went on line last night and found out that the New York Library runs

a free course on Basic education, teaching reading and writing. Would you like to try it?' Mary's face lit up.

'Do you think I could do it, I mean learn to read and write?'

'Yes why not? You're a bright intelligent young woman.'

'No I'm not. How can I be if I can't read or write?'

'Mary trust me you're intelligent. It has nothing to do with reading or writing they just make it easier to show you're intelligent.'

Mary stood outside the huge building unable to read the plaque on the wall of the library but she made a vow that one day she would. She mounted the marble steps and entered the enormous entrance hall, conscious of her heels clacking on the floor as she approached the desk. She hesitated as she shyly asked the way to the Reading and Writing class.

'That's on the third floor miss, there's an elevator over to your right.'

She entered it and two floors later the elevator door slid noiselessly open and she stepped out into a large open space. An arrow directed her to the enrolment desk. There were one or two people already waiting. After about ten minutes she approached the desk.

'I would like to enroll on the English speaking and writing class.

'Ok,' said the clerk, 'please complete this form. Mary was handed a form. She looked puzzled,

'But miss?'

'I know, do as much as you can, it will help us to assess your level of language and put you in the correct class.'

Mary sat struggling with the form. She managed her name and age but nothing more. Feeling very depressed she handed the form back to the desk. The clerk studied it for a while, and said,

'Class one, second door on your right. Your teacher is Mr Bainbridge you'll like him.'

Mary knocked and entered the room. There were five other students already sitting at individual computers.

'Hi I'm Mr Bainbridge,' called out a tall middle-aged man, 'come and choose a seat. We'll be starting in a few minutes. You can then let me have your name for the register.'

Mary sat on the desk nearest to the door and looked around. One or two of the students nodded at her. She turned and watched the teacher, his face looked familiar. She was sure she had seen him somewhere before. He was in his middle forties, balding with piercing grey green eyes

that didn't smile. She realised It was his eyes that seemed to be familiar.

The first lesson was 'a get to know you' session. Each student was asked to stand up and say a few words about themselves and their aims for the course. When it came to Mary's turn she simply said, 'My name is Mary I want to learn to read and write proper,' and she sat down. She listened as the other students gave their stories. They all shared the same problem, they had either not gone to school or had skipped classes usually without their parents knowing. What she found very interesting was the reasons why they wanted to learn. They all said it was because without reading and writing they felt they didn't belong in the world.

When Mary got home that evening Sofia was eagerly waiting to hear how the class went.

'OK,' I s'pose.'

'What does that mean?'

'It was alright that's all.'

'You don't seem very excited by the chance?'

'Well it's gonna be hard work.'

'Sure, but won't it be worth it?'

'Yeah I guess so.'

Mary struggled to keep up. They had all been given a simple reader to practice at

home. As she was leaving one evening Mr Bainbridge stopped her. 'Mary haven't we met before?' Your face seems very familiar.'

'No I don't think so Sir, lots of girls look like me.'

'No I never forget a face. Wasn't your name Salome?'

Suddenly her stomach lurched,

'Please sir, I must get home' He suddenly grabbed her arm.

'Please you're hurting me.'

'I remember, you're the girl. Oh! My God,' he suddenly stopped speaking, let go her arm and rushed out of the room.

Mary stood confused. Slowly an image began to form; a man with a good head of hair with those same eyes. He must have been wearing a toupee then? Now seeing him balding, he looked different but the eyes they were the same. He was one of her regular punters. She froze.

She couldn't wait to get home. The house was empty when she let herself in. Uncertain what to do she paced up and down. Suddenly she heard the key in the front door.

'What happened? Are you all right?'

Mary burst into tears fumbling for words,

'The teacher... Mr Bainbridge, he recognised me,' she sobbed. 'He remembered me.'

‘How?’

‘He was one of my regulars.’

‘It’s all right Mary; you’ve done nothing wrong. That’s all in the past you don’t need to feel guilty.’

‘I can’t go back, I can’t face him again I want to die.’

‘It’s all right Mary; it’s not your fault.

You can’t change the past but you can make a new future. You must go back and confront him if necessary, you have nothing to hide. If he makes any further references to the past or suggestions, ignore them and let me know, we’ll go straight to the head.’

It was a very subdued Mary who returned to the class next morning. Mr Bainbridge hardly spoke to her and as the day proceeded she began to relax. She was even beginning to enjoy the teaching particularly the computer programs. It was as the class was leaving that he again asked her to stay behind. She looked confused and some of the other students noticed it.’

‘What’s up Mary?’ they asked.

‘Could you stay with me after class please.’ They waited with her. Mr Bainbridge was confused when he saw several students waiting with Mary.

‘You asked us to wait behind,’ said one of the young men sarcastically.

‘It’s nothing, I’ll see you tomorrow,’ he stammered and rushed out of the room.

'What was all that about?' said Placido a dark haired student who was standing near by.

'It was nothing; he was just trying to come on to me. Don't worry about it I'll see you tomorrow.'

Mary set off walking home but Placido caught with her.

'Look Mary I think you're real smart. I'd like to meet you some time after class? Here's my cell number call me,' and he was gone. Mary thought no more about him but continued to see him in class; he would smile at her and sit next to her at break offering her a coffee. Gradually he began to tell her about his life.

'I was born in Mexico but me and my family came across to the States illegally. I was about five, there were six of us, mum, dad and four kids. I was the youngest. I still remember being held by my dad as we crawled under the wire. We were taken to a reception station at Yuma in the southeast corner of Arizona. I think we stayed there for several weeks until an uncle offered us a place to live.

'What was that like?' Asked Mary.

'Ok I suppose but it has sad memories. My mum died soon after from TB and we were all taken into a hostel. My dad left one night and I've not seen him since,'

‘What about your brothers and sisters?’

‘I don’t know where they are, we all went our own ways.’

‘What about you?’ He asked Mary.

‘You don’t want to know about me. My past is a closed book I just want to build a new future.’

Mary and Placido began to meet after school and walk to the park where they sat reading to each other. At first it was a bit tedious because they kept meeting words they couldn’t pronounce. Slowly over the weeks their reading improved. Placido was curious and wanted to know more about Mary but every time he asked he was met with a rebuff so after a while he stopped asking but that didn’t stop his curiosity. She seemed so much older than her years, which made him think that she had also had a hard life as a youngster.

One day Sofia saw Mary walking home with Placido and asked her who the young man was.

‘Oh, just someone I met at school, he’s from Mexico.’

‘If he’s a nice guy why don’t you invite him in?’

It was mid morning when her phone rang. Sofia's secretary answered it and put the call through to Sofia.

'It's for you, Mary's teacher is on the line.'

'Hello this is Sofia Bridges, how may I help you?'

'Hello Sofia, I am Mr Bainbridge Mary's teacher. She hasn't come into class today do you know why?'

'She hasn't? That's odd, she left this morning as usual carrying her books. I don't understand, you say she is not at school?'

'Yes we are very strict about pupils attending or telling us that they are not going to come.'

'I'm sorry I didn't realise she wasn't there. Thank you.'

'Sofia could you make sure that in future you tell us.' The line went dead. Sofia immediately phoned Mary but her phone sent a message *this phone is disconnected*.

Mary was enjoying herself. She and Placido had decided to cut class and go and see the famous Cirque du Soleil circus that was playing at the Radio City Music Hall. They managed to get tickets for a matinee. Later that day she arrived home still excited by the spectacle and was not prepared for Sofia's anger.

'Where have you been?' Sophia wanted to shout at her.

She needed to release the anger that had built up after her last client Amber left her office, the memory of her still fresh in her mind. She was a spoilt 16 year-old from one of New York's 'Royal' families, a Rothman. She was dressed in tight white pants; a low cut blouse and high heels. She wore bright red lipstick and striking eyeliner Her mother an equally overdressed woman accompanied her. She was in her forties, tending to fat with blonde hair tumbling over her face and numerous rings glittering on her fingers.

Not waiting to sit down, she started.

'You must do something about her,' she shouted pointing to her daughter sitting demurely on the couch looking as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth.

'What's happened?'

'It's the third time she has been arrested by the police for taking coke. I don't know what to do with her. I have given her everything and the more I try to be kind the worse she gets. She's a liar and a thief.'

'Where did she get it from?' Sofia asked innocently, suspecting the answer. Mrs Rothman blushed and became indignant.

‘She stole it from my bag the thief, I’ve told her before not to go to my things. Then she went with some friends into the park and in broad daylight. The police have been very good and looked away in the past but this time the kids were laying all over the place fornicating, yes that’s the word. It was disgusting so the police said and they had to take her in.’

Sofia had heard it all before.

‘You must help me I don’t want Amber sent to prison. She only learn more bad habits.’

Mary got the full brunt of Sofia’s anger.

‘Your teacher has been on the phone. He was very annoyed expecting me to know where you were. Where were you? Why weren’t you in class? What on earth got into you, cutting class and not telling anyone?’ Mary was speechless she had no idea that it would be taken so seriously.

‘How can I trust you if you do things like that? I suppose you were with Placido?’

‘Yeah, he managed to get some last minute tickets to the circus. I’d heard it was very good so I went, what’s wrong with that? Why are you making such a fuss?’

‘Because, because,’ and then she stopped. ‘You’ve come such a long way since we met and I don’t want you to go back it’s too easy.’

'How would you know?' Mary demanded angrily. 'You've had it cushy. You've no idea what it's like to be thrown on the dump before you've started to live.'

Sofia listened; she knew that one day she would have to tell Mary her story.

'Mary please I need to tell you something. I do know what you're going through I've been in the same place. I know that sense of worthlessness, feeling as if one is shit that everyone else is making it and you are irrelevant. That you don't matter, nobody cares and you are alone not knowing where to turn. Yes, I know that feeling, I lived it for 5 years.'

Mary was confused.

'I don't understand?'

'How could you? You see me as a successful lawyer with a job, a home and a future but it wasn't always like that. I came from the street like you. I never knew my mother. As far as I remember I was brought up in a home and thrown onto the street at sixteen younger than you. I met a man who promised to look after me but turned out to be a pimp and I became his slave. You see we have both had the same life and for me, it isn't over yet. My brother is on death row. When he was eighteen he killed a man who was molesting him. The family couldnt afford a good lawyer so we used the free one he

was shyster and let us down. After repeated stays of execution, my brother is due to burn next week so don't tell me I had it cushy.' Mary was itching to interrupt, she was dying to know how Sofia managed to escape and build a new life.

'How did you get out?

'The same way you can if you want to. I was lucky,' continued Sofia, 'I did a stranger a favour and her family rewarded me by giving me an education. I grabbed it with both hands I knew it was my last chance.'

It was a very thoughtful Mary that went to bed that night. Sofia's story went round and round in her head. She fell asleep with the words; *it was my last chance* ringing in her ears.

Next morning Mr Bainbridge was surprised to see Mary already seated in the front of the class when he came in. He said nothing but waited to see whether she would stay the whole day. At break, Placido came over to her.

'What's with you today?' He asked.

'You seem very tied up, has something happened?'

'No,' she said and continued writing.

Later he stopped her in the corridor.

'Let's cut class and go up town?'

‘No I’m staying here. I’ve got a lot of work to do, go on your own.’

Two years later Mary completed the course obtaining an Alpha plus mark. As she left the library and walked down the marble steps she stopped in front of the plaque that she could now read.

‘In 1901 Dr John Shaw N Billings, the first director identified a site occupied by a derelict reservoir on 5th avenue between 40th and 42nd street. It was selected for the New York Library. The little known architects Carrière and Hastings won the competition with their Beaux Art design. When completed it was the largest marble structure In the US. In 1910 President William Taft opened the main branch of the library.’

She whistled to herself as she made her way home. Life was beginning to make sense. Now I need to decide what I am going to do, what my purpose in life is?

It was a bit of shock when she found Sophia crying.

‘What’s happened, why are you so down?’

Through her tears she sobbed,

‘I’ve just heard that my brother Frank has lost his appeal.’

‘I’m sorry, can’t you do anything?’

'I don't know if there is anything more we can do. The thought of him burning just sends me into a mania. It's so excessive. I know that if we'd had a good lawyer he would have been out by now. I've tried to have the case reviewed but every time they come up with the same sentence.'

Mary could feel the tension in the office; she was now part of the team, assisting Sofia's secretary and had also learned to touch type.

'I need to go and see him for the last time,' said Sofia.

'I'll come with you,' said Mary.

Sing Sing prison now called Ossining Correctional Facility was constructed in 1824, the third prison to be built by the New York State. The site chosen was near a small village called Sing Sing, a Native American word meaning 'stone, stone', which is how it got its name. Modernized over the years, it received accreditation in 1989 for having fulfilled a set of national standards from the American Correctional Association.

It housed more than two thousand inmates all men and had the unenviable record of having in the past executed over six hundred men and women. Sprawling across fifty-five acres of the east bank of the Hudson River, thirty miles north of New York

City, it was a hodgepodge of huge cellblocks, and administrative buildings connected by tunnels and corridors with painted central yellow lines to control the traffic flow.

Having arranged a date and a time by phone, they set off. Sofia knew the way and within a short while they were driving along the Henry Hudson Parkway North towards the river. Traffic was heavy and it took just under an hour to reach the prison. They could see the dark walls of the main blocks looming up as they approached. The car park was very full and Sofia took a few minutes to find a space. Locking the car, she made her way towards the entrance followed by Mary.

'Wow it's huge,' said Mary intimidated by the overpowering size of the cellblock, She followed Sofia to the entrance and the two women were subjected to the routine search procedure before being directed to the social hall where the reunions took place. The room was already full when they arrived and the sound of talking was almost deafening as it bounced off the walls.

'Table 11,' barked a guard pointing to a table near the window. They sat waiting. Sofia spied her brother and waved to him as he walked slowly towards them. He looked terrible like an old man. He was bowed and

limped his head was shaved and he had several day's growth. He slumped into the chair and nodded to them.

'What d'you come for?' he growled.

'I wanted to see how you were,' said Sofia trying to take his hand.

'You mean before they fry me.' Mary was by now horrified by what was happening. She couldn't believe that she was seeing a man who was soon to be executed.

'Frank, is there anything you want?' asked Sofia.

'Yeah to get it over with, I can't bear the waiting. Why do they have to drag it out?'

Sofia knew not to answer him when he was in a state like this. She just felt so sad that his life was going to end here in this place and she could do nothing about it. She said none of that but instead she made small talk.

'Who's the girl you're with?' he said finally, looking at Mary.

'Oh she's my assistant.'

At that moment the guard arrived,

'Time's up,' he said. 'Say your farewells.' Sofia could hardly say the words. It might be the last time she would see him. So many thoughts ran through her mind, so many things she wanted to say but in the end she said with tears in her eyes,

‘Goodbye Frank I love you.’ He said nothing, just turned and walked away. That’s the last I will see of him, Sofia thought.

The following morning Sofia was in the office soon after six as usual when her phone rang. That’s strange she thought, who rings at this time?

‘Hello,’ she said.

‘Hello is that Sofia?’ a familiar voice asked. It was her practice partner

‘Have you heard?’ he sounded excited.

‘What?’

‘The State has withdrawn the death penalty. It’s the end of capital punishment. No one will ever be executed in this state again. Isn’t that wonderful?’

‘How? What happened?’

‘You’ll read all about it in the newspaper,’

‘No tell me now.’

‘The Grand court was hearing an appeal against the death sentence. A guilty verdict of first degree murder had already been established and the jury was being asked to decide on the sentence.’

‘Yes I understand that but what was the problem?’

‘It is a requirement in capital cases that the judge instruct the jurors that in the event of a ‘deadlock’, that is if they failed to

reach a unanimous verdict, the judge could impose a sentence that would leave the defendant eligible for parole after 20 – 25 years.

‘I guess that’s the law.’

‘Yes but it was considered that this instruction had the effect of coercing the jurors to vote for execution because of a fear that a violent person might eventually be released onto the street after 20-25 years.’

‘The prisoner who was conducting his own case having dismissed his lawyers, appealed against the ‘deadlock instruction’ on the grounds that it violated his rights under the 8th amendment of the Constitution. That amendment prohibits the federal government from imposing a cruel and unusual punishment. The deadlock was judged to be such a ruling. On this basis the Chief Justices decided that a sentence of capital punishment was illegal.’

Sofia listened with incredulity. The death penalty had at last been abolished. Frank would not be executed. She had to talk to him. She delayed until 10 am the time when prisoners were allowed to receive one call a day and phoned the prison. She waited for Frank to come to the phone.

‘Frank I am so excited. Have you heard the good news? We are all delighted for you.’

'Why?' he asked in a flat unemotional way.

'Because?'

'Because what?'

'That I will now live out another twenty-five years in this hellhole. That's good news is it? I don't think so,' and the phone went dead.

Sofia looked at the dead receiver unable to take in what he had said. I must go and see him immediately she decided but events beat her to it. That night she received a phone call. A gruff unemotional voice asked,

'Is that Sofia the next of kin of Frank Bridges?'

'Yes can I help you?'

'This is the governor of Sing Sing. It is my sad duty to inform you that your brother was found hanging in his cell today, there were no suspicious circumstances.' The line went dead.

Sofia felt her chest contract as a spasm of pain and overwhelming sadness hit her.

'No, no! He couldn't?' Mary heard her crying and saw the agony in her eyes.

'What's happened?'

'It's Frank he's hung himself. Oh! My God I never thought he was so desperate. I didn't understand. I should have known. It's

my fault for not realising.’ She hung her head in her hands.

Mary stood silently watching her, not knowing what to do. Reflexly she leaned forwards and hugged Sofia’s bowed head.

The funeral was held a week later at a local crematorium There were no more than ten people in the congregation. They stood beside the coffin a simple plain wood box with a bunch of roses on top.

The priest said a few prayers and then Sofia went to the lectern.

‘My dear friends,’ her voice broke. ‘Frank was my older brother and throughout all the difficulties in my life he stood beside me. He was quick to anger and it was this that ultimately destroyed his life. I had hoped that when the death penalty was abolished he would find some reason to live but it wasn’t so. Bless you Frank,’ and she walked away.

The bier holding the coffin slowly slid through the curtains and was gone. There was a strained silence before people came forwards and spoke to Sofia expressing their regrets. Mary watched. She had seen so much death and violence in her short life that the whole scene was unreal. To her life and death were interchangeable, ‘just a matter of time’ she would say.

The day for Amber's trial was not far off. Sofia had learned that she was being held in a juvenile detention centre. At breakfast one morning she mentioned it to Mary.

'I need to think about the case against Amber. Do you want to help me with it?'

'Yeah, sure why not, what could I do?'

'I was thinking that you and she have a lot in common.'

'We do?'

'Yes you have both struggled to find a voice, you because of poverty and she because of wealth.'

'That's a bit of a puzzle isn't it?'

'Maybe but I don't think so. You see I have had a long time to think about how we become who we are and where we get our values from.'

'I think I am losing you,' said Mary.

'Ok let's leave that discussion to another time. Meanwhile what I would like you to do is to go and see her. Introduce yourself as my assistant and say you want some background information before the case. Try and dig out what makes her tick, what she really wants and why she has chosen the life style she has?'

'Sofia, I don't know. I don't feel comfortable with that maybe she won't see me. What would I do then?'

‘Look Mary you’re a bright girl. I know you’ll find a way maybe not the first time but you will, I promise you, you will.’

The following day, Mary phoned the appointment’s office at the center. The telephone rang and rang to the point that she thought that she had the wrong number. Then a rough female voice demanded,

‘What do you want?’

‘I would like to visit Amber Rothman?’

‘What’s her number?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Damn, you people are all the same, you expect me to run round after you. You can’t even remember a number, wait a moment.’ There was a long pause then the voice spoke,

‘She’s in Block D room138. Her number’s R745312 remember that and mention it when you visit. She will be available on Wednesday pm from 2-5.’ The line went dead. Mary looked at the receiver; it was going to be a tough call, she decided. She rang again, another voice replied. She repeated the details and arranged to visit the following Tuesday. Over dinner she told Sofia bout her plans,

‘I have arranged to visit her. Now I need some background information.’

‘OK we have a file on her in the office, have a look at it and make some notes.’ It

was a thick wad of notes that Mary found herself sifting through; most of which were police reports. That was not what she was looking for. Eventually she found a single summary sheet that told her all she needed to know.

‘Born in a private nursing home the only child of Francesca and Jonathan Rothman, a Wall street Financier. She was brought up by a nanny and at age 4 was sent to a private school. The father left and she and her mother lived together. Her mother had had several affairs. There was a reference to a hospital attendance. The note said that Amber had fallen and injured her elbow. The doctor noted bruising on her chest and back and made a note with a question mark by it. ‘Battered baby syndrome’ - no action was taken.

Mary sat holding the note staring out of the window deep in thought. She realised that despite all her comfort, Amber had been deprived of any semblance of love. No wonder she had gone off the tracks.

Sofia listened as later that day Mary told her what she had found out.

‘I think you may have given us the angle we need in court. Let’s see what else you find out when you visit her.’

Crossroads Detention center was very different from Sing Sing. Although both places were designed to detain people, the juvenile unit had an air of hope. From the moment she entered Mary felt at ease despite the walls and the examination. The woman in the office greeted her.

‘Good afternoon, who have you come to visit?’ she asked. ‘Do you have her name and number?’ Glancing at the card she said, ‘you’ve come to visit Amber?’ She looked up at the clock.

‘Yes you’ll find her in the recreation room along that corridor,’ she said pointing to her right. Mary thanked her and walked slowly along the corridor. She had the strong feeling that she had done this before. She remembered the residential home in which she had spent her adolescence, waking every day fearful of what might happen, the abuse, the violence that might come at any moment. It was the same feeling she now had as she approached the meeting with Amber. She was preparing herself for a rejection, a refusal to see her and was wondering how she would handle it. She felt in a no man’s land without a map to guide her, lost and confused.

Then she saw Amber sitting on her own watching the TV. She recognised her from their last meeting but she looked very different. Gone were the trendy clothes, the

jewelry and the outlandish hairstyle. Now she looked the part, a teenager wearing a simple T-shirt, jeans and trainers. She would pass in any crowd. Amber must have felt her presence because she turned and looked at her a puzzled expression on her face.

Mary spoke first,

‘Hi Amber how you doing?’

‘You!’ A hostile look appeared on her face. ‘I thought Sofia was coming not you?’

‘She asked me to talk to you, to get to know you after all we have a lot in common haven’t we?’

Amber looked confused; she didn’t talk to housemaids.

‘You and me, how’s that possible? We’ve nothing in common. Go away and tell your boss to come, I not talking to you.’

Mary struggled to calm herself. She remembered what Sofia had said and tried to be friendly.

‘You don’t realise but you and I are quite alike in many ways,’ she repeated.

‘How’s that? You and me, impossible.’

‘No it isn’t, we both went off the rails, got lost, didn’t we?’

‘You?’

‘Oh yeah, big time, so I know where you’re coming from.’

Amber was curious,

‘What happened to you?’ You seem so together knowing where you’re going,’

‘Maybe now but it wasn’t always so not at all. I’ve been through the mill walked the path to hell. I know the road.’ The two girls moved to the canteen and ordered a cup of coffee. Slowly Amber began to talk about herself.

‘You’d think that having everything would have made me happy? I lived in a big house, had my own room, even my own bathroom. I had servants to do everything. I didn’t even have to pick up my clothes off the floor. I never cooked a meal or helped in the kitchen it was all done for me.’

Then Mary saw a dark look furrow her brow.

‘I usually ate alone because my mother was out with yet another celebrity boyfriend. I couldn’t keep tabs on whom she was with. She never had time for me. I can’t remember the last time we spent an evening together.’

‘So what did you do?’

‘I was bored so I went out. I wanted to shock her to make her realise that I existed. I went to all the dives. Soon I had a crowd of friends we would hang out together. They were living on welfare so I paid their way. I was never short of money.’

As Mary listened she tried to compare her early life with Amber’s. There was such a contrast. On the face of it, it couldn’t have

been more different. Her family was always broke struggling to make a dollar. They would even fight over a dime. She shared a bed and often went without a meal. Their upbringing seemed the opposite but Amber and she had one thing in common she knew, they both were desperate for love. They needed to be valued for themselves, to be cherished, to be told that they were special. Instead they grew up alone and neglected, never knowing the love that was the right of every child.

As she described her upbringing Amber began to understand. As if speaking to the room she said,

‘They never loved me; they never cared for me, they thought that things, objects would make up for love. I was desperate I was lonely I felt I was rubbish.’ As she began to cry, Mary’s heart went out to her and she leaned forwards and held her as she sobbed. Slowly Amber’s sobs ceased and she began to smile. She looked into Mary’s face and the two young women hugged.

‘Amber you are not alone any more.’
Mary said

Sofia was at home when Mary arrived back from the Center.

‘Well how did it go?’ she asked almost before Mary had got indoors.

‘Better than I could have imagined, she is a very nice young woman. I liked her very much we became friends.’ Then Mary described what happened. Sofia listened without saying a word. At the end she said, ‘That’s wonderful I told you it would be OK. You just had to be yourself and your kindness and goodness would show through. Were you able to make any notes?’

‘No it would have interfered with our conversation,’

‘I agree but you do need to make a record of what happened for the court.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Well, your testimony will be essential in the defence.’

‘Wait! Wait! You don’t mean you want me to testify in her defence.’

‘Yes of course I do, your testimony will be essential.’

‘No I can’t, not again. I’ve done it once before I can’t do it again. Please find some other way,’

‘OK we’ll talk about it later, meanwhile make your notes.’

Sofia was preparing for the court appearance. As a juvenile Amber was required to attend a fact-finding session in the New York County Family Court on Lafayette Street in lower Manhattan. It was an eight storey white fronted block accessed

through a glass fronted entrance into a large foyer off which the court itself was situated.

An hour before the hearing, Amber had been brought in a police van from the detention centre. She was surprised to see her mother sitting on a bench.

‘What are you doing here?’ she demanded.

‘I’m your mother, they want to ask me a few questions about you.’

‘That’s a joke you hardly know anything about me.’

At that moment Sofia and Mary entered, Mary could see that Amber had been crying.

‘Its going to be OK,’ she whispered squeezing her arm. Then the two went into the court to await the judge leaving Amber and her mother waiting outside. They sat together in silence.

The court doors opened and they were asked to enter. The judge was already seated. Mrs Rothman went to sit with the State officer while Amber sat with Sofia and Mary.

The court officer announced,

‘The court is now in session. Justice Mrs Margaret Hastings is presiding. This is a Fact-finding, the State versus Amber Rothman a minor. Miss Rothman is accused of taking Cocaine and other illegal drugs on

several occasions and causing a disturbance in a night club.'

He turned and faced Amber.

'Amber how do you plead?'

'Not guilty'

'Representing the State is Mr. Isaac Swale and representing Amber is Miss Sofia.'

'Good morning councillors,' said the judge, 'I believe you know each other.' They both nodded. 'So you know the rules. Mr Swale will you please present the case for the State?'

'I call on Mrs Rothman to take the stand.' Smartly dressed in her forties wearing a light grey suit a pink scarf tucked around her neck, she was duly sworn in.

'Please give your name occupation and relationship to the accused.'

'I am Mrs Francesca Rothman. I am a housewife and the mother of Amber.'

'Thank you, please tell us about the early life of your daughter.'

'Amber is an only child. I was unable to have any more although I wanted to. From the beginning she was difficult, didn't feed well, crying a lot and never really settling as a baby.'

'Did you breastfeed her?'

A look of surprise spread on her face,

'Your Honour, do I need to answer that question, what has it to do with anything?'

'Mrs Rothman, the lawyer is trying to give the court some background information. Please answer the question,' said the judge patiently.

'Yes I tried for about a week but she wouldn't and in the end she was weaned on a bottle.'

'Did you feed her?'

'Yes of course I am her mother.'

'Did you have any help?'

'Yes I had a nanny to look after her.'

'What about her father, did he take any interest in her?'

'Not exactly.'

'What does that mean?'

'Well he left us soon after Amber was born and didn't return.'

'Are you saying that he had no contact with her?'

'Yes.'

'Why did you decide to send her to a boarding school when she was four?'

'Because she was so difficult at home, I thought that the discipline there would help her.'

'Did it?'

'No.' But I was at my wit's end, she was becoming unmanageable.'

'A last question,'

‘Do you feel you did your best to bring up your daughter?’

‘Yes your honour I love her and did everything in my power to make her happy,

‘Thank you Mrs Rothman please stay sitting as the defence may want to question.

Sofia whispered to Mary;

‘Mary I would like you to conduct the questioning of Mrs Rothman.’ Mary was shocked,

‘I can’t, I don’t know what to ask.’

‘Yes you do, just ask basic question, you’ll see how easy it becomes.’

Sofia stood up

‘Your Honour, my assistant Mary will conduct the first cross-examination.

Mary feeling self-conscious walked towards Mrs Rothman stopping less than five metres from her.

‘Mrs Rothman you told the judge that you fed Amber. Is that true? Isn’t it true that the nanny fed her and that you looked in occasionally between your socializing? Isn’t it also true that you sent her to a boarding school so that you could get on with your many affairs?’

‘That’s ridiculous, no it’s not true, I spent a lot of time with her as much as I could,’ she added.

‘I have affidavits from a number of clubs and restaurants that say that you were

a very frequent customer often staying well into the night and needing to be assisted home. Is that true?’

‘Well yes I do like to have a good time. I used to go out like anyone else. But I always knew what I was doing.’

‘Who looked after Amber while you were away?’

‘My nanny of course, she was very reliable.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Of course,’

‘I see because I have a witnessed statement from your nanny to say that Amber was often left on her own when she had her night’s off.’

There were loud hisses from the onlookers.

‘Mrs Rothman is that true?’

The witness suddenly lost her calm and turned to look at her counsel. She shouted to the Judge.’

‘I don’t have to answer that, I’m not on trial here.’

‘Mrs Rothman,’ the judge replied patiently, ‘the defense is merely trying to find out about the family situation in which Amber was brought up. Please answer the question.’

Mrs Rothman whispered.

‘Very occasionally Amber might be left on her own for a hour or so.’

'I'm sorry I couldn't hear what you said,' repeated the Judge. Could you please repeat your answer so we can all hear?'

'VERY OCCASIONALLY AMBER MIGHT BE LEFT ON HER OWN FOR A HOUR OR SO.'

'One final question, you said earlier that and I quote 'I spend a lot of time with her as much as I could.' Did you mean when you were not gadding about? You don't need to answer that, no further questions.'

There was a pause in the proceedings as the judge wrote some notes and Mrs Rothman returned to her seat next to Mr Swale who smiled at her.

'Miss Sofia will you please call your next witness.' A rather demure Amber walked slowly to the bench and sat down in the witness seat. She was dressed in a flowery dress with smart shoes, looking like a sophomore. She took the oath.

Miss Sofia approached her and smiled.

'Amber I am going to ask you a few questions about your childhood. Was it a happy one?'

'Objection!' called out My Swale waving his documents. 'The witness was a child how could she make such a judgement?'

'I agree,' said the Judge. 'Miss Sofia please re-phrase the question.'

'Amber what do you remember of your childhood?'

Amber sat with her hands in her lap.

'I was very lonely there was no one to play with,' she whispered.

'Please speak up,' said the Judge.

'We want to hear you.'

Amber repeated her answer more loudly.

'What about your mother and father didn't they play with you?'

'No I never saw my father and my mother was always busy seeing friends, I think. I was mostly with the nanny.'

'Did she play with you?'

'Sometimes but she was often on the telephone talking to someone, I think it was one of her boyfriends.'

'How would you describe your childhood?'

'I was lonely and unhappy,' and she began to cry. There was a stunned silence in the court and then the judge spoke,

'I think we will have a break, reconvene in 30 minutes.'

Outside in the hall Sofia confronted Amber.

'What's going on Amber? You were doing so well.'

'I felt sorry for my mother, she looked so unhappy.'

'Well you shouldn't, she failed you.
Don't you realise that?'
'I suppose so but I still love her.'

The court reconvened and Amber returned to the stand.

Sofia spoke,

'Now Amber I want you to tell the court about the incident when you were on holiday from school.'

'No please I can't.'

'Amber please it is important that the court knows as much about you as possible.' Slowly Amber began to describe what happened on the day.

'Mum had gone out and I was with Nanny. I decided to go to bed early and had fallen asleep when giggling and shouting awakened me. I recognised my mother's voice and another, a man's that I didn't know. They were laughing. I heard them stumbling up the stairs and then it went quiet and I fell back to asleep.'

While Amber was speaking Sofia was watching Francesca's Rothman's face. She was becoming agitated and was sweating. Amber went on.

'Sometime during the night I was awoken by a movement in my room. I could see a man's outline against the curtains.'

'Did you know who it was?'

'No.'

‘What was he wearing?’

‘Nothing and I could see he was excited.’

‘What happened next?’

‘I tried to shout for help but he muffled my cry with his hand across my mouth and then.... ‘ Please I can’t, I don’t want to, please!’

The Judge leaned forwards Amber and said softly,

‘Just tell the court what happened.’

‘He pushed himself against me, pulled up my nightdress and I felt a sharp pain as he, no I can’t.’

‘Did he rape you?’ Asked the Judge.

‘Yes.’

There was a silence in the room. Francesca was crying holding a handkerchief against her face.

After a few moment the Judge said,

‘We will have a recess. When we return I would like Mrs Rothman to return to the stand.

It was a very subdued Francesca who remounted the stand. She was reminded that she was still under oath.

‘Mrs Rothman you have heard the account given by your daughter on the night in question. What is your recall of what happened?’

‘It’s a lie. Amber has made it all up. She has a vivid imagination and only wants to hurt me.’

‘So it’s all a lie?’

‘Yes nothing like that happened, I would know.’

‘Your honour I would like to present an witnessed affidavit written by the doctor who examined Amber when she returned to school.’

Sofia handed a sheet of paper to the court officer who passed it to the judge.

‘Miss Sofia will you please read it to the court.’

‘Yes your honour. It is dated three weeks after Amber returned to school. Dr Ambrose Taylor an Obs & Gynae specialist signed it.

He writes,

I saw Amber at the request of the school nurse. She was concerned that at a routine medical, Amber said that she had missed a period. On close questioning Amber described an incident at her home.

Examination confirmed that she was not a virgin. There was old bruising and contusion of the vulva consistent with forced entry some weeks earlier. A test confirmed that she was pregnant. She elected to have an abortion and that was carried out a few days later at a local hospital.

Mrs Rothman who had remained silent through out suddenly let out a scream,
‘It’s a lie, its not possible. Why wasn’t I told? I am her mother I should have been told.’

‘Mrs Rothman please control yourself,’ said the Judge. ‘We will have a short recess than I would like to see the Lawyers in my office.’

Mr Swale and Miss Sofia followed the judge into her chamber and were directed to chairs.

‘Mr Swale were you aware of what we have just heard?’

‘No your Honour?’

‘Are you saying that you didn’t speak to the accused.’

‘Well Sir, we tried to but Mrs Rothman did all the talking and basically forbade us to see or speak to Amber.’

The court reconvened and Mr Isaac Swale began his summing up.

‘Your Honour, we have heard extensive details about Amber’s upbringing and the behaviour of her parents but they are not on trial, they are not the subject of this Fact-finding. We are here to determine whether Amber in repeatedly using banned drugs violated the laws of this state. Nothing

we have heard from the defense has militated against a custodial sentence for the accused despite her tender years. Your Honour this court must send a strong message to the youth of our state that banned drug taking will not be tolerated no matter what their personal circumstances.'

The court went quiet no one moved. It was if time was standing still when Sofia rose. She stood waiting for the court to settle.

'Your Honour we have heard a very plausible case against my client from my colleague Mr Swale the lawyer for the prosecution. Amber does not deny that she used banned drugs, that she was violent and drunk, acts which violated the New York State laws. As such she is guilty of the charge.'

Sofia paused as if to gain energy.

'Your Honour, in order for justice to be seen to be done, we need to do more than just punish this young woman, we need to understand the factors that led her to this action. Were they the actions of a stable young person? Amber wanted for nothing materially speaking. She had everything that she could possibly wish for, her every whim was satisfied. She lived in the lap of luxury undoubtedly the envy of her many friends.

'She was a 'poor little rich girl,' a phrase that has been used many times to

described the circumstances in which many youngsters like Amber find themselves. But something was missing from her life, something as vital as the air she breathed, the food and drink she ate. I refer to love, that indefinably essential without which all else pales, all objects cease to have value. They become hollow trappings around an empty space.'

'It was in that place that Amber lived her every day, alone unloved searching for a meaning in her life. At boarding school she had some semblance of love from her friends but the love she most needed most craved, that from her mother and father was denied her. She sought meaning to her life by escaping into drugs and alcohol. She associated with fellow users and they provided her with the love that her parents denied her. The alternative would have been to commit suicide as the only way out.

'Your honour Amber is a desperately lonely young woman whose sole crime was to seek love in the only place that she could find it. That is surely not the act of a criminal but of a desperate soul.'

Sofia walked back to her seat and sat down. The judge cleared her throat.

'I would like to see both lawyers in my room now.'

Amber's mother saw that Amber was now sitting on her own and walked over to her. The two looked at each other.

'I'm so sorry Amber. I didn't understand, I was so busy with my own life; I didn't notice that you were so alone. How can you ever forgive me?'

Two years to the day, a small group assembled at a cleared site in New York to consecrate the laying of the foundation stone of the Amber Rothman Rehabilitation Center. A silk ribbon had been tied across the entrance, beyond which was an engraved marble stone. The mayor and other dignitaries were present.

At 10 am Mrs Rothman stepped forwards and standing poised with her scissors, said,

'By cutting this ribbon, I hereby signal the commencement of the building of the Amber Rothman Rehabilitation Center, which will be a beacon of light to all the forgotten and underprivileged children who through an act of chance were denied the right of a happy and carefree childhood.'

|

The Semi – detached

A story of a personal disaster that brings two people together. They overcome the challenge and find happiness with their new child.

David Alsop had finished his breakfast and was reading the morning paper: in his late 30s he was still very much a mother's boy. He had tried a short period living on his own but he missed his mother's home cooking and comforts. Now his graphic company was struggling and it was while he was searching for a new job that his mother came into the kitchen. She was glowering with rage. He groaned to himself. Here we go again, he thought. I know what's coming.

'I suppose you've done nothing about finding a place?' She said thumping her fist on the table, her eyes glaring. Not waiting for his reply she continued. 'I'm sick and tired of seeing you at almost 35 still living with me. David I need my space my privacy; you're no longer a child. What do I have to do to make you understand how I feel? I love you but enough is enough.'

David got up and walked towards her, a smile on his face. He leaned over and put his arms around her waist.

‘Mum hold on, I agree with everything you say. I am doing something about it.’

‘You say that every time and do nothing. What is your excuse this time?’

By chance he had seen an advert in the newspaper from Barnsdale a local auction house and he pounced on it. Ignoring her barrage of complaints he lowered his voice.

‘It so happens that there is an advert in the newspaper about a Property auction. They’re holding a sale of local houses on Saturday at the Doncaster Rugby Club. There are a number of houses for sale within my price range. I am going to bid for one.’

‘Why didn’t you say that before I got angry?’

‘You didn’t give me a chance, and anyway I wanted to give you a surprise.’

‘I don’t need surprises like that.’ She paused. ‘Do you want me to come with you?’

‘No mum, as you keep reminding me, I’m a grown man and I’m going to prove it to you.’

The auction was due to begin at 10 am. But David got there early and still struggled to find a space in the almost full car park. He was surprised by how many people wanted to buy houses. Unknown to him another car nosed its way into a space and the driver got out. Stella Fortune, single, 31 was an

independent young woman living in a small apartment. She needed to upsize and was looking for a small house in the locality.

Both David and Stella had already indicated their interest to the auction and had completed the necessary documentation. The concern over money laundering had increased the requirements for auctions so that prospective buyers were now expected to produce one of the following, a current signed passport, current UK driving licence, a residence permit or a revenue tax notification.

But if that was not enough, they had to provide evidence of an address either in the form of a utility bill, bank or building society statement or a recent mortgage Statement. David felt that he was now living in a police state.

The two prospective buyers made their way into the hall and found seats. They were unaware of each other and sat on opposite sides of the room. Promptly at 10 am the auction started. Neither David nor Stella were interested in the first few properties, which were mainly one to two bedroom apartments. What they were looking for was a small 2-3 bedroomed house either detached or in a block of town houses. Gradually as the smaller properties were

sold, the auctioneer, a burly bearded man with a broad Yorkshire accent began selling larger house in the outskirts of Doncaster. David had his eye on a house in Batby close. It was on the end of a row of town houses.

David could feel the excitement in the room. People were shifting in their chairs to get a better view and to make sure the auctioneer could see their bid. It was David's first time at an auction and he could feel his palms sweating. I wish Mum had come he said to himself, I hope I don't bid for the wrong house and make a fool of myself. He checked his programme again. Yes that's the one. He positioned himself so that he could see between the heads of the people in front and waited. He could feel his heart thumping in his chest.

The room went quiet. The auctioneer a stocky man with a white beard waddled onto the platform and picked up the microphone. His voice boomed out on the speaker asking for bids.

'Now Ladies and gentlemen we come to the choice properties, residences that only the discerning buyer would appreciate. Let us start with 31 Batby close. A well maintained town house with four bedrooms a small garden front and back, ideal for the first time buyer. It has been converted into two semis but could very easily be returned

to its former glory,' He said laughing at his own joke.

'Let's start at 200,000 pounds?' he suggested.

'Have I a bid for 200,000 pounds,' he repeated looking expectantly around the room. There were no takers.

'OK someone give me 100,000 pounds to start the ball rolling.' A hand went up.

'I have 150,000 pounds' urged the auctioneer; the bids began to come thick and fast. £160,000, £180,000, £190,000, £200,000 and then they stopped. David could see the auctioneer sweating. His rather chubby face was aglow with excitement.

'Come now Ladies and Gentlemen I won't give it away, it's worth a lot more.' The bids slowly began to mount again rising by £10,000 until a figure of £230,00 was reached. Then the hall went quiet. People began to look at each other wondering who was going to bid next. David's realised this was his opportunity. He took a deep breath, raised his hand and shouted out,

'240,000 pounds,'

He waited, his world stopped still as he silently hoped. On the other side of the hall Stella was also waiting. She knew that if she was to be successful it was now that she should make her only bid. She saw her

opportunity and called out '250,000 pounds.' It was her top bid, all the money she could raise with a mortgage.

The auctioneer waited; he looked around studying the faces before him, looking for a movement a sign that there was going to be another bid. But no one spoke, there were to be no other bids. His face showed disappointment as he checked his notes and shrugged. Looking down heartened, he said.

'I'm sorry Ladies and Gentlemen as there are no more bids, I must withdraw the property, the reserve price has not been reached.' There was a groan in the hall.

David stayed on to the end and watched as a number of other properties were sold but none interested him. Nothing came up that he wanted. Reluctantly and feeling dejected he made his way to the exit.

Now excluded and disappointed, he ambled back to his car and had almost reached it when he felt a tug on his sleeve. Stella had seen him leave. They had both bid for the same house.

'Excuse me; I noticed that we both wanted the same property and that it was withdrawn. Could I talk to you about it?'

David looked around and saw a slim young woman in her early thirties, with dark brown hair and grey-green eyes. She was

wearing a smart suit with a flowery scarf around her neck. Surprised and a bit tongue tied he stammered,

‘Well yes OK, there’s a café over there let’s go and talk over a coffee.’

They settled themselves in a corner seat and sat for a moment before David spoke.

‘What had you in mind?’

‘Let me introduce myself. My name is Stella Fortune. I have the Hairdressing saloon in the high street. I hope you didn’t think I was a bit forward but I have seen the house and I like it. As you know from the brochure it has been divided into two semis. I would be happy to live in one. Would the other suit you because if it did, we could buy the property together? We could raise more money and hopefully reach the reserve price,’ she gushed. ‘We could do the legal things afterwards.’

David thought for a moment. She seemed a sensible young woman. If one of the semis suited her it would make his decision much easier and would surely suit him. Casting caution to the wind and excited by her plan he agreed.

‘Let’s go back and see if the Auctioneer is still in the building?’ Prompted Stella.

By chance they met him as he was coming down the stairs. He stopped surprised by the two wanting to speak to him.

‘Excuse me Sir, could we trouble you for a moment? You know the house in Batby Close that was withdrawn because the reserve was not met, can you tell us what the price was?’

‘It’s Ms Fortune isn’t it?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m sorry Miss but it is unethical for me to release the reserve price and in any way I am really in a hurry.’

‘Please could you then tell me what price would buy the property?’

‘Let me see,’ he said looking at his books, ‘a figure of £275,000 would secure the property.’ Stella looked at David and nodded, he nodded back.

‘Yes we’ll have it,’ she said clapping her hands in glee. She turned to David and shook his hand,

‘Congratulations partner.’

David couldn’t wait to tell his mother what had happened at the auction. She pounced on him as soon he let himself into the house.

‘Well how did it go?’ She started, even before he had time to sit down.

‘Wait, I’ll tell you all but it’s not what you expect. So be calm and hear me out before you start haranguing me.’

‘Did you get it?’

‘Well yes and no.’

‘David for God’s sake what does that mean exactly?’

‘What it says.’ David then slowly explained to his mother what had happened. As she listened he could see her mouth slowly gaping open. Finally she couldn’t contain herself anymore.

‘You mean you’re going to buy a house with a complete stranger.’ He nodded. ‘You’re mad. I knew I should have come with you. You may be a top-notch graphic designer but you are a child as far as the world is concerned. Buying a house with a complete stranger,’ she repeated, ‘and a woman at that.’

Several days later Stella and David arranged to meet at the Auction house. By that time all the documents had been drawn up. They each signed and became the joint owners of a town house.

‘Let’s celebrate,’ suggested David as they made their way to the local pub.

Stella was a bit concerned about David’s plans to move in. He seemed very uncertain. His lack of worldliness surprised her but it brought out her motherly instincts and soon she was helping him. She could see that he was a novice as far as living on his own was

concerned. He didn't know the first thing about where to start.

'We need to decide who lives where,' she announced as they stood outside the house with the two front doors. 'Do you want to choose?' she asked, or shall we just toss a coin.'

'Yeah, tossing a coin sounds good,' he said.

'Head or tails?' she asked as the coin rose into the air spinning from side to side.

'Heads,' he said watching it bounce on the ground then stop.

Stella leaned over,

'It's heads, make your choice David,' she said.

'OK I'll take the left one.'

'That's how the decision was made,' David told his mother. 'No sweat just a simple choice. You see all your worries were unnecessary. When you meet her you will see why I trusted her. She's a really nice person.'

'Has she got a boyfriend?' His mother couldn't resist asking.

'Oh mum! , She has a soldier who is abroad at the moment. I can assure you our relationship is entirely platonic.'

'I wish it wasn't, it's about time you found a nice girl and settled down.'

‘Please mum not that again. When the time comes I will.’

As David got to know Stella better he began to tell her about himself.

‘My father was born in Iraq and met my mother when she was volunteering at a local hospital; she was born in Scotland and trained as a nurse but wanted to help and volunteered to work abroad. When the uprising started she was sent home where I was born. I’ve lived here all my life. I have never met my father and have never been to Iraq.’

‘Would you like to go?’

‘I don’t know, I think I would find it very difficult after all I’m British not Iraqi.’

David stood in the hall of his new home eyeing the walls and floors. The last owners had done a good job and it all looked clean and fresh. It was a typical semi with the stairs on the right opposite the front door. Downstairs to the left was the front room and kitchen. The two bedrooms and bathroom were upstairs. It was quite bright and he felt thrilled that now at last he had his own place. He was excited and wanted to get going.

There was a lot to do as he only had a few pieces of furniture given to him by his mother to keep as family heirlooms. He heard a sound and realised that Stella must

be in next door. He knocked and she came to the front door a broad smile spreading across her face. She was obviously pleased to see him.

‘How’s it going, have you moved in yet?’

‘Well,’ he said blushing. ‘Yes and no, to be honest, I don’t know where to start. I don’t even have any furniture. I need to go out and get fixed up.’ Feeling rather sheepish David added, ‘I don’t suppose you would have any time to help me, would you? My mother has refused. She said it’s up to me now and I suppose she’s right, it’s about time I learned how to be independent.’

‘David of course, I would be happy to. It wasn’t such a long time ago that I felt like you.’

Some day’s later David’s car drew up outside the Doncaster Furniture Barn. Stella and he alighted. It was the most popular furniture shop in the neighbourhood. He stood amazed at its size. Its frontage was almost as wide as the length of a football pitch with several large windows full of tempting furniture. He couldn’t believe it when Stella told him that it only sold furniture. When he got inside he felt like a little boy entering a toyshop. It was an absolute Aladdin’s cave.

So much had changed since his family had last bought their furniture. There were so many items he had never seen before and he didn't know where to start, there was so much choice. He ran his hand over the stained wooden surfaces amazed at the quality of the items.

With Stella's help he had made a list of the things he needed but the choice and price range flummoxed him.

'Where do we begin?' he gasped. 'I feel like a fish out of water. It's too much?'

'Let's go through your list,' said Stella patiently as if leading a small child. 'We'll start with a bed that's a pretty safe choice.' But when they got to the bed department the sheer variety of bed sizes and qualities amazed him. Stella remained very calm and took him through the different styles and costs. Soon he had chosen a middle of the range double bed with a sprung mattress.

'Why don't you test it?' Invited the assistant. 'Lie on it and bounce about.' David laughed as he was flung high into the air.

'Individual spring pockets are the best,' assured Stella prodding the mattress. Slowly over the next hour or two David struggling with indecision finally had bought everything he needed.

'That's enough for today,' announced Stella. 'We have the worst yet to come,

selecting linen and kitchen utensils. Once that's done you won't have to worry about anything for a long time I can assure you.'

David let himself in at home and called out.

'Mum it's me.'

'How did you get on?' His mother called from the kitchen.

'I think we're almost there. It's been a hard journey. I didn't know there were so many choices. Stella was a great help, I couldn't have done it without her.'

'I hope you are not falling for her, you haven't forgotten she's got a boy friend.'

'I know mum. It's OK we're just good friends.'

'I've heard that before?'

'I mean it.'

David was getting used to living on his own. He liked the privacy and now that the house was furnished it really felt like home. He would shut the front door and close out the world for a while. He liked the freedom of eating when and whatever he liked. The local food store made some great take-away dishes that he simply had to warm up in the Microwave.

The small rear garden soon became his hobby. He laid out a neat lawn and a vegetable patch and it wasn't long before

Stella was looking over the fence admiring his handiwork.

'Wow! David what a change you've made. It looks really professional, I wish I could do the same.'

'It's nothing,' he said blushing, 'I would be happy to do up your garden for you if you like?' Soon he was laying out her garden with a vegetable patch and a lawn. By the autumn they both had a good crop of potatoes, onions and beans. In turn she made him some apple pie one of his favourites.

David was in the garden when an excited Stella came out to see him.

'Jamie is coming home.' she shouted. 'I'm planning a house warming with just a few close friends, I would like you and your mother to come.'

A week later David heard Stella's guests arriving. He had collected his mother and they made their way to the party. Stella, wearing a pale blue dress cut low at the neck received them.

David introduced his mother.

'Hello Mrs Alsop I've heard so much about you.' said Stella.

'I am delighted to met you. David doesn't stop taking about you, how you

helped him sort out his home,' David blushed.

'Please come in and meet my friends. At that moment a well built man with short-cropped hair and a small moustache, typical of the military joined her.

'David, this is Jamie, my soldier.' She smiled linking his arm in hers. He was taller than David had expected.

'Jamie, this is David. He lives next door. He's the guy I told you about. I hope you'll be friends.' David smiled and put out his hand but Jamie brushed it aside impatiently and walked away but not before he had time to say,

'Why didn't you tell me he was an Ali Baba?'

David was startled by Jamie's retort. It wasn't the first time he had met prejudice but he tried hard to forget about it. Happening so unexpectedly, it really shook him. He just couldn't understand what it was all about.

Although he was born in England and lived all his life there, he retained a swarthy appearance due to his Middle East origins. This made him look and feel a stranger. People would move away from him on the bus or train. They would actually get up and change seats.

As time went by he had almost got used to it and most of the time he didn't

notice it. But Jamie's reaction reminded him. He and Stella had become good friends and he had assumed that her boyfriend would be the same. Now he knew it would be different. He could see that Stella was upset and embarrassed by Jamie's behaviour.

'Jamie what are you saying? Please don't use that word,' she reacted horrified at his hostility.

'Well he is, isn't he? Why are you friendly with him?' He glared at her. 'I don't want you to see him any more. Ask him to leave now.'

'Jamie! Don't be ridiculous. No I won't. He's a good friend and as it happens I like him. He's kind and helpful. Who do you think did my garden? You're not jealous of him are you?'

Jamie ignored her last remark and glaring at her walked away to get himself a drink. Soon he was flushed and raising his voice talking loudly about the war in Iraq. It was getting embarrassing and David offered to intervene.

'No David, please ' said Stella, 'don't speak to him when he is in this mood, I can deal with it.'

Several days later David heard shouts and cries coming from next door. He listened and recognised Stella's raised voice she was clearly distressed. Without thinking he went

and knocked on her front door. Jamie opened it.

‘What do you want?’ He snarled.

‘I heard Stella screaming, is she OK?’

‘Fine no problem, she fell over but she’s OK.’

David was about to leave when he saw Stella. She was holding her face and he could see her cheek was swollen and reddened.

She called to him,

‘It’s OK David I’m fine. Go back home everything is OK.’

Stella was worried. Jamie had changed; he wasn’t the same person that she had grown to love. She remembered him as a gentle caring considerate man. His rejection of David was so out of character. She had never seen him so rude. He was also very rough with her. She couldn’t understand what had happened to him. Perhaps he was just tired she decided and forgot about it

David knew that Stella wasn’t OK and couldn’t put the incident out of his mind. He could see that Jamie had hit her in the face. He wanted to go in and confront Jamie but finally accepted that it was really none of his business.

He tried to carry on as usual and after work on Friday he dropped into the local

pub, the King's Head for a drink and to meet up with some buddies. He was beginning to relax and drink his Brown Ale when he saw Jamie at the bar. His face was flushed and he was talking loudly. He thought of greeting him but then decided not to say anything.

He had turned to speak to a friend when he suddenly heard a shout.

'Who let that Iraqi in here?' He recognised the voice. Jamie was leaning against the bar pointing his finger at him.

'Get him out of here,' he bawled, 'He's been trying to screw my girl,' There was a sudden silence. The regulars were embarrassed by his outcry and looked confused not certain what to do. Eventually someone called for the Publican and a squat man with a white goatee beard appeared from the back room. He was known affectionately as lofty.

'What's going on here? What's the commotion about?' he asked.

'It's the Iraqi, get him out of here,' Jamie repeated raising his fists. 'If you won't do it I will.'

The Publican was shaken by the demand.

'Now sir, we don't speak like that here,' he said trying to pacify Jamie. But Jamie was adamant. He advanced towards David and swung at him. David saw the blow coming, ducked and stepped backwards. He

lost his balance and fell heavily against a wooden armchair. He felt a sudden jarring pain in his back and he let out a yell. It was excruciating. He would later describe it as a sudden intense pain across his back followed by an electric shock, which flashed down his legs leaving them numb. He tried to get to his feet but his legs wouldn't work, they were useless and he fell back onto the ground crying in pain.

'Get up you coward,' shouted Jamie. 'I haven't finished with you yet.' but David was beyond hearing. He was racked with pain across his back and around his trunk and unable to move. For a moment no one came to his assistance, they were too stunned by what had happened and didn't know what to do. Fortunately the local doctor Dr Brown who had just come in saw it all. He pushed his way towards David shoving Jamie aside.

'Get out of my way, this man's injured can't you see?'

'He's only pretending,' muttered Jamie preparing to continue fighting. But two locals pulled him back and pinned his arms behind his back.

Meanwhile the doctor examined David. As he tested him, his face became grimmer.

‘Get an ambulance,’ he shouted. ‘This man is badly injured. Quickly there is no time to lose.’

David lay listening to the conversation; he still could not understand what had happened. The pain was a bit easier but why couldn’t he move his legs?

In the distance he heard the sound of an ambulance approaching and then drawing up outside the pub, the sirens slowly fading. Then the pub doors were slammed open and two paramedics rushed in carrying their bags. They immediately rushed to him lying helplessly on the floor. The first man asked.

‘What happened mate?’

‘I fell backwards against the chair.’

‘Can you move your legs?’

‘No they’re useless.’

‘Can you feel me touching you?’

‘No,’ said David becoming more frightened. Then it struck him I’m paralysed. It felt like a bad dream. The next twenty minutes flew by. A mobile stretcher was brought into the pub and he was carefully rolled onto it. Then it was wheeled out onto the pavement and pulled up a ramp into the back of the ambulance, the doors were shut and the vehicle set off its siren blaring.

The A& E staff was ready when the ambulance arrived and rushed David into

ICU. An oxygen mask was put in place and an IV was set up. After a brief examination the A& E doctor called the Neuro Team.

Mr Thomas, the Neuro-surgeon on duty and the head of the team arrived and immediately took control. He asked David exactly what had happened. As he listened he began to recognise what the problem was. He had dealt with many spinal injuries and was very familiar with them. He quickly tested movement and sensation and confirmed that David was unable to move his legs or feel anything.

'We need a CT urgently,' he said to his assistant.

Back in the pub, the atmosphere had calmed. The police had been called and Jamie was still being held by one of the regulars while awaiting their arrival. The pub had an uncomfortable silence as the regulars craned forwards waiting to see what would happen. They were excited at being present at a real life incident.

'It's much better that TV,' one wag whispered to his neighbour.

After about twenty minutes two armed Policemen entered the bar and took control.

'Who's the boss here?' One asked.
Lofty stepped forwards,
'I'm the Publican.'

‘OK tell me what happened. Why is this man being held?’ He said pointing to Jamie.

The publican described the incident and said that the injured man had been taken to the hospital.

‘It was an accident,’ shouted Jamie. ‘He just fell backwards. I didn’t touch him he was just shamming. There was nothing wrong with him.’

At that moment the doctor stepped forwards.

‘I am Dr Brown a local GP. I didn’t see the incident but came in soon after it. I could see that the man was badly injured after examining him. I think his name was David?’

‘Yes,’ said the Publican, ‘his name is David Alsop. He’s one of my Friday night regulars, a quiet chap.’

‘I think David was paralysed,’ said the doctor. ‘It was tragic. I sent for an ambulance and he went to Doncaster Royal Infirmary.’

David’s scan was ready and the films were put up on the screen. The doctors crowded around while he waited for their verdict. As Mr Thomas scanned the shadows a deep furrow appeared on his brow. What he had seen confirmed his worst fears. The first lumbar vertebra was crushed and was causing a severe compression of the lower spinal cord. The outlook was grim. The only

chance of any functional recovery was to remove the compression and stabilise the spine a hazardous procedure. Mr Thomas knew that time was critical, the longer the compression remained the less recovery was likely.

‘Prepare him for the theatre,’ he thundered. ‘We have no time to lose.’ In ICU David received the news calmly. He knew that there was something seriously wrong and was not surprised that an operation was necessary.

What he didn’t know was that the chances of any recovery were slight. If he had known, he may have declined the operation but he wasn’t given the choice.

Despite the account given by the doctor in the pub and the police interrogation at the station, there wasn’t enough evidence to detain Jamie and he was allowed home.

He was still tight and was singing to himself when he let himself into the house. Stella asleep was woken by his footsteps and greeted him bleary-eyed at the top of the stairs.

‘Is that you Jamie? It’s about time. I was getting worried. Come to bed.’

It was in the early hours that she heard a hammering on her front door. She shook Jamie but he just groaned and turned over.

Hurriedly putting on her dressing gown she went down stairs. Confused by the flashing lights and the sounds she looked through the glass pane of the front door and saw two uniformed policemen standing there.

She opened it slowly,

‘We are sorry to disturb you miss but does Corporal Jamie Burroughs live here?’ asked the taller of the Officers.

‘Yes, but he’s asleep, can you come back later.’

‘We would like to speak to him now if that is possible. Could you please rouse him.’

Stella was now getting frightened. Were they real policemen? She hadn’t asked them for their IDs. Then she remembered a movie and said,

‘Have you a warrant to speak to him?’ Of course she knew that a warrant wasn’t necessary but the ploy worked and then they said.

‘OK ask him to come to the station some time later today without fail,’ and they turned and left.

Stella watched as they walked back to the police car. She was puzzled, what did they want Jamie for she wondered? Was it anything to do with last night when he came home so late and drunk? Had he done

anything stupid? She returned to bed but was unable to sleep. During the night she turned over and looked at him. His face was lit up by the moonlight, He seemed so calm and relaxed, I'm sure there is nothing to worry about she decided and went back to sleep.

Jamie had almost finished his breakfast before Stella approached him. Innocently she asked,

'Did you have a nice evening?' Jamie concentrated on eating his cereal. Why was she asking that? He thought. She doesn't normally want to know what I do when I go out.

'Fine, I had a few drinks and met some old mates, why do you ask?'

'Because the Police came early this morning and wanted to talk to you.'

'The police! What did they want?'

'I don't know, I thought you would know.'

'What did you tell them?'

'That you were asleep and they left. They want you to go down to the station today and answer some questions. Did anything unusual happen last night?' Probed Stella.

Jamie raised his voice and glared at her.

'Shut up Stella, stop asking stupid questions. You sound like the police. Let me finish my breakfast in peace.'

Stella waited and a few minutes later asked.

‘Another strange thing, David didn’t come home last night. It’s not like him. Do you know why that might be?’

‘Me! Why should I know about David’s movements? You’ll have to ask him.’

Jamie was upstairs finishing dressing when he heard the telephone ring and Stella answering it. The voice said,

‘Hello, is that Stella?’

‘Yes Margaret.’ Stella immediately recognised her friend.

‘How are you?’

‘Fine.’

‘Have you heard the news about David?’

‘What news?’

‘David’s in hospital, he had a terrible accident last night. They say he will be paralysed.’

Stella’s mind went blank, for a moment, she couldn’t think. Then she heard the front door slam as Jamie went out without saying goodbye.

‘Where is he?’

‘He’s at Pinderfield’s Neuro Centre.’

‘Do you know what happened?’

‘Not exactly.’

I must see him Stella thought, I wonder if his mother knows? Twenty minutes later she

was entering the Centre. She rushed to the reception desk.

‘David Alsop, do you know where he is?’

‘Let me see,’ said the clerk. ‘Yes, he’s in ICU down the corridor, first on your right, follow the signs.’ Stella ran as fast as she could. She turned the corner and saw the sign IC unit and stopped.

She didn’t immediately recognize the woman who was sitting on the bench, Her head was bowed and her hands clenched on her lap. She must have heard Stella’s footsteps because she looked up and Stella recognised her, it was David’s mother Mrs Alsop. She looked distraught.

‘Hello Mrs Alsop, it’s Stella; we’ve met.’

‘Oh yes dear thank you for coming.’ she whispered.

In the OR a drama was unfolding. David deeply anaesthetised was lying on his front. His lumbar region had been draped and the surgeon was preparing to begin the operation. He made a long midline incision over the lumbar spine deepening it to expose the spinal column. Immediately he could see the damage. There was severe bruising of the muscles and fragments of bone confirming the scan findings of a crush fracture of T12 compressing the spinal cord.

Meticulously Mr Thomas removed the many small fragments of bone until the cord; a pale tube the thickness of man's thumb was visible. It appeared bruised and not moving. As the last fragment was removed the cord began to pulsate slowly. He turned to his assistant.

'You can see the discolouration and contusion of the cord. It is this damage that is blocking the messages from the brain getting to his legs and causing the paralysis. Now we need to stabilise the vertebral column with plates and screws to stop any further movement.'

The operation took just over four hours during which David's condition remained stable. He was completely unaware of what was happening. Finally the wound was closed, a dressing was applied and David was returned to the ICU to be monitored.

Now began a race against time inside his body. The nerves now no longer under pressure would begin to grow at the rate of 1mm a day to allow the nerve impulses to pass up and down to restore power and feeling. But at the same time healing was occurring. Scar cells were multiplying in response to the injury. They would block the passage of the nerve fibres preventing return

of power and feeling. It was an uncertain conflict.

Stella and David's mum heard footsteps and saw Mr Thomas walking slowly towards them. They both sat up eager to hear how the operation went.

'It went well. I managed to do what was required. Now it's a question of waiting and seeing how much recovery will occur.' As he talked Mr Thomas knew that the outlook for recovery was poor but at this early stage he didn't want to discourage the family members.

Stella was relieved to hear what to her seemed good news.

'I must go home and find Jamie,' she said to Mrs Alsop. 'He was due to see the police and I want to find out what happened.'

When she arrived home Jamie wasn't there. She wondered if he was still at the Police station and was going to phone but decided to go there instead. The police station was quiet when Stella arrived. She walked up to the desk and asked to speak to the Officer who had been questioning Jamie. After a few minutes Sergeant Collins came out of one of the rooms.

'Hello, are you Jamie's fiancée?'

‘She hesitated and then said, ‘yes, what’s happening? Can he come home please?’

‘No, not yet, we still have a few more questions to ask him. Do you know anything about the incident last Friday?’

‘What incident? No,’ said Stella. ‘I was at home that evening. Jamie went to the pub on his own to catch up with some friends. He has just come home on leave. He has been abroad on duty in Iraq.’

‘Yes we know he told us all about his military service. Had he talked to you about the incident?’

‘No I don’t know anything about it. I would like to know.’

‘I believe you know David Alsop, he was the injured party’

It was then that Stella suddenly put two and two together.

‘Are you questioning Jamie about the accident to David?’

‘Yes?’

‘I don’t understand, what has one thing got to do with the other?’

‘We think Jamie may have been directly involved in David’s accident.’

Stella went cold. Suddenly things began to fall into place. David’s visit to the Pub on Friday evening and not coming home that

night, Jamie coming home drunk and falling into bed without saying anything and the police wanting to speak to him the following day. Was it all a coincidence or if not, it was too awful to contemplate? I must ask Jamie I'm sure there must be a simple explanation, he wouldn't hurt David.

After another hour of questioning Jamie was released and came out of the police Station blinking in the bright sunlight. Stella was waiting for him. Without saying a word, he got into the passenger seat of her car and she drove home. He could see that she was dying to ask him about the incident but he said nothing. If they were going to have a shouting match he didn't want it to be while she was driving.

Stella let them into the house and took off her coat. Jamie went into the lounge and sprawled himself on the couch and switched on the TV.

'I'm bushed,' he announced, 'I could kill a cup of tea.' Stella was impatient to find out what happened but decided to bide her time. She returned with a tea tray and put it down on the coffee table in front of Jamie. While pouring the tea she began,

'Jamie, what's going on? I need to know what happened last Friday at the pub.'

'Nothing! I told you. David fell over a chair. It was an accident. He'll be OK'

‘Please Jamie I know it wasn’t as straightforward as that. You’re not telling me everything. Please don’t keep secrets from me, you are making me frightened.’

Stella realised either he was lying or he didn’t know how serious the accident was.

‘Jamie,’ she screamed now almost hysterical ‘David is paralysed, he may never walk again, don’t you realise that?’

‘Paralysed! No he can’t be, he was just pretending it was all a joke.’

Stella shuddered as if a cold draft had swept into the room.

‘I have just come from the hospital. David has had a major spinal operation. The doctor is not very hopeful. Did you hear me, not very hopeful? What really happened Jamie? You must tell me the truth I need to know. I think something terrible happened in the pub that night and you were there.’

‘Hey just a minute, I don’t know what you’re reckoning but I was just having a drink that’s all, a drink! ‘

The two sat in silence. Stella was trying to quieten her jangled nerves. Jamie was trying to stay calm to play it cool after all it was an accident no one could have got hurt, he told himself. Finally, speaking very slowly and calmly Stella said,

‘OK Jamie just tell me everything that happened, step by step everything. No lies no cover up.’

‘Hey Stella you aren’t the police. I’ve just been through that merry go round at the station.’

‘I know, I know, I want you to tell me every detail. I need to know how David was injured. I must know. Please help me,’ she began to cry.

Jamie had always bulldozed his way through problems ever since he was a small boy. He would never admit he had done anything wrong always finding an excuse, anything to avoid accepting responsibility. Now he found himself in the same fix.

‘OK Stella You want me to tell you again what happened? It was as I said. I got to the pub at about 6pm and offered some drinks around. Soon I had a few new friends and I was telling them about Iraq. At about 8, David came in, you know, he’s a regular. They all knew him. We nodded to each other and he went to the other end of the bar ordering a beer. Suddenly I heard a yell and saw him falling backwards. He somehow got caught up with a heavy chair and fell over the arm. I thought it was all a joke and that he would get up. But he didn’t and was shouting in pain. At that moment the local doctor popped in for a drink and saw David

on the floor. We all thought David was still play-acting but the doctor said he was badly injured and called an ambulance. They arrived very quickly and David was bundled off to the hospital. That's all I know.'

Stella was watching Jamie as he spoke. There was something in his manner that alarmed her. It was all too pat, no hesitation, no time to think, it was if he had rehearsed the whole story ready to retell it if needed.

Jamie could see that Stella was confused.

'What's the problem?' he said. 'Don't you believe me?'

'Yes of course but it doesn't make sense.'

Suddenly the telephone rang Jamie answered it.

'It's Mrs Alsop, she wants to speak to you'

'Hello Mrs Alsop how are you? I hope you got some rest.'

'I'm fine. I wanted to let you know that David is waking up.'

'Ok. I'm on my way. See you soon. Is he still in ICU?'

'Yes.'

Stella turned and gave Jamie a peck on the cheek and went out to her car.

It was short drive to the hospital. She knew her way and rushed passed reception following the signs. As she entered the ward she saw David laying in bed with his mother sitting by his side, she was holding his hand. Stella gasped seeing how weak and pale he looked. For a moment with his eyes closed, she thought he was dead. Then he sighed. He must have heard her enter as he opened his eyes.

‘Hello Stella,’ he whispered turning to look at her. His eyes were sunken and appeared vacant. Stella leant over and lightly kissed his cheek aware of a sour smell on his breath. She pulled up a chair and sat down.

She hesitated and then asked,

‘How are you feeling David? I’m so sorry to see you like this.’

‘Not too bad, they gave me a strong painkiller and I feel OK, no pain really.’ Stella was desperate to find out what actually happened, to hear David’s version but clearly this wasn’t the moment. He was in no state to answer questions so she decided to bide her time.

At that moment the nurse came in,

‘Could you go outside for a few minutes please, I wish to attend to David.’

Stella could see that Mrs Alsop was still very distressed. She went over and put her arm around her.

‘He’s going to be all right,’ she assured her. ‘He’s a strong man. The first few days after an operation are always difficult. You’ll see how quickly he perks up.’

‘I know but will the paralysis go? I can’t bear the thought that he will be paralysed all his life, live in a wheel chair. I’ve seen pictures. It’s no life. My poor boy, life isn’t fair. Just when he was beginning his new life making his own way in his own home thanks to you. Why does it happen? Why?’

Stella said nothing. She knew that nothing that she could say would ease her pain. Glancing at her watch realised it was getting late. She must go home and cook supper.

Jamie heard the front door key turn as Stella let herself in. She was startled to see his haversack and hand luggage piled up in the hall.

‘What’s this? Are you leaving?’

‘Yeh I’ve had a call from the camp. I’ve got to re-join my regiment. Apparently there is a new campaign starting. It’s all hush hush, so I can’t tell you much.’

‘Do you know where you will be sent?’

‘No, I’ll find out when I get back. Sorry to leave at such short notice. By the way how’s David? I hope he’s on the mend.’

‘I don’t know what to say, he looked terrible but that’s apparently normal after major surgery. They won’t know about the paralysis for many months.’

‘Stella I don’t know what the doctors are thinking about? That man’s hysterical. It’s all a big sham you’ll see? One day he will get up and walk.’

Stella was speechless. Something suddenly clicked in her head.

‘Jamie I think you’d better go and don’t come back ever.’

It was Friday night, two weeks later. Stella was tired. She had just finished a hard day and was at home sitting trying to relax. Earlier in the saloon David’s accident was still on everyone’s lips. Everybody was horrified by what had happened to him. As much as she tried she was still unable to accept it was just an accident, something was missing. It just didn’t add up.

On an impulse she made a decision. I am going to the pub to find out for myself. Dressed plainly with a high-necked long sleeved blouse, loose trousers and low heels she hoped she would not draw too much attention when she entered. She was feeling

self-conscious, as she was not often seen on her own in a pub at night. She was pleasantly surprised by the reception she got. One by one friends of David came over to say how sorry they were and wished him a speedy recovery. No one seemed to be able to spread light on what had happened, they all stuck to the same story. It was an unfortunate accident.

Taking her drink Stella went into the lounge and sat by the open fire nursing a gin and tonic, her mind far away, when her eyes focussed on a small CCTV camera high up in the ceiling. She studied it for a moment and suddenly something clicked. Without making a fuss she got up and went over to speak to the Publican who was sitting on a stool at the end of the bar.

‘Shorty,’ she said, ‘I’ve noticed you have a CCTV camera in the ceiling. Is it working?’

‘Oh yes, we’ve just had it installed; we make sure it’s maintained. Then with her heart in her mouth she quietly asked,

‘Have you looked at it recently?’

‘No, not yet this month, we normally look at it at the end of the month.’

‘So you haven’t seen the video taken on the night David was injured? Surely the police asked to see it?’

‘As a matter of fact they didn’t. I don’t think they knew we had one and I didn’t think to tell them it’s new you see.’ Stella’s heart missed a beat. Then very calmly she asked,

‘Perhaps I could have a look at what you have recorded so far this month. Would that be possible? She said smiling sweetly.

‘I suppose so it’s very easy to work. I’m a bit busy right now but if you could stay on until we close at 10, I would be very happy to show it to you.’

Stella was on tenterhooks watching the clock as it unhurriedly moved on. She thought at one point it had stopped. But at last the hour had reached ten and the publican was shouting,

‘Time gentlemen, um time Ladies and Gentlemen please.’

As the last person said goodbye he closed the heavy front door.

‘Come into our kitchen Stella, it’s behind the bar. My wife Betty will make us a cup of tea while I set up the camera. Let’s see now, it was two Fridays ago so we will start during that day and see what happened.’

It only took a few minutes for him to set up the projector and screen. The film started running from the Thursday. It showed a good view of the whole length of the bar. Now it was showing Friday. Stella could see

David coming in. He ordered a drink and acknowledged Jamie who was leaning at the other end of the bar.

Suddenly Jamie's voice was heard,

'Who let that Iraqi in the bar? Get him out of here, He's been trying to screw my girl.'

Stella sat up startled by the anger in Jamie's voice. Then the Publican's voice was heard,

'What's going on here? What's the commotion about?'

Then Jamie again,

'It's the Iraqi, get him out of here,' Jamie could be seen raising his fists. He went on,

'If you won't do it I will.'

The Publican was seen trying to calm him.

But Jamie was totally out of control. He advanced towards David with his fist raised. David leaned back to avoid being hit and lost his balance falling heavily against the chair.'

Stella let out a scream.

'Oh my God,' She shouted, 'it's horrible how could Jamie behave like that and deny everything. I'm so ashamed; I feel it was my fault. If David and I had never met this wouldn't have happened and David would be unharmed. How am I going to live with this?' She slumped over and began sobbing.

Betty stopped what she was doing in the kitchen and came over to comfort her.

‘Stella, it’s not your fault; you weren’t to know it would happen. You can’t control someone else’s behaviour.’

Stella gradually calmed down.

‘The police must see that film,’ she insisted. ‘It’s the evidence needed to show what really happened that night.’

At an unknown address Jamie was back with his regiment preparing to leave for action. It was lunchtime and the dining room was packed. The noise of chattering voices was echoing off the ceiling when the two Military police entered. Looking around, they spotted the Sergeant in charge and beckoned to him.

‘We are looking for Corporal Jamie Collins, Is he here?’

‘Yes, he’s over there at the far table,’ he said pointing to him.

‘We need to ask him some questions. Is that OK?’

‘Yes please go ahead,’

The two men made their way slowly between the tables until they reached the far side of the room. Jamie was in the middle of a story when they interrupted him.

‘Are you Corporal Jamie Collins?’

Unaware of what was about to happen he said laughing,

‘Yes, have I been awarded the VC?’

The smile soon disappeared off his face when he heard.

‘Please come with us Corporal. We have a warrant for your arrest. We have been instructed by the police to return you to Doncaster where you will be remanded while awaiting trial.’

As they read out the warrant Jamie lost his calm and began berating and abusing them.

‘You’re making a mistake; it’s all a mistake. I did nothing. He fell off his chair.’ They took no notice; they were used to resistance and guided him firmly from the dining room with the minimum of disturbance to the others.

A four-hour journey awaited Jamie who did as much as he could to disturb the guards. Being unaware of the CCTV video, he was abusing and threatening them with lawsuits for wrongful arrest. They for their part remained civil and polite stopping for toilet breaks, light snacks and drinks. All the time Jamie remained hand cuffed.

It was late evening when they arrived back at the Doncaster police station. The staff was at first surprised to see a man in military uniform, hand-cuffed and being handed over to them. Sergeant Craddock who was on duty however recognised Jamie.

‘I know you, aren’t you the man who was accused of a fight in a pub some while

ago?' Jamie said nothing. He was still confused by his arrest and return to Doncaster. He was then stripped of all his belongings, photographed, fingerprinted, asked to strip and provided with some prison clothes. Finally he was dumped into a cell. Then he began to shout.

'This is a frame up. What I am accused of? You can't keep me here it's against the law.'

Upstairs in the examination room they were setting up to show the CCTV video to Jamie Collins the following day. Just after 9 am the next morning he was brought into the examination room and asked to sit down.

'What are you doing now?' he demanded.

'Wait and see, you'll soon know.' The blinds were lowered and the video commenced. The sergeant was watching Collin's face as he saw and heard the events of that Friday night in the pub. There was a loud gasp from him as he leaned forwards, his head in his hands. The film ended and there was silence. Collins tried to collect his thoughts. Then as if he had found a way out he shouted,

'It's a fake; the film's a fake. It's all a lie, a damn lie.' Then he began to shake and make a loud wailing sound like a sick animal tearing at itself.

'What's with him?' asked the constable.

'He's having a fit of conscience, said the Sergeant.

Then he turned to the prisoner.

'It's OK Jamie. It's all over now. We know the truth; we know what happened that night.'

'I lost it. When I saw David at the bar he was in a shadow; he looked like so many of the Iraqis that we were fighting. I just saw red, it was as if I was back on the front, it was my life or his.'

The news that Jamie was back in town and was being held at the Doncaster Police Station soon filtered back to Stella. She was in her saloon when she heard.

Now she had a dilemma. One part of her never wanted to see him again but the other needed to tell him what she thought, say to him what a miserable bastard he was. She needed the satisfaction of having found him out, of telling him what a wretched apology for a man he was. The more she thought about the way he had tried to cover up his crime the more angry she got. Eventually her indignation boiled over and she arranged to see him.

Stella set off confidently from home but faltered and almost turned back when she reached the Police Station. Calming

herself she walked up the steps and entered the reception area.

The officer on duty at the desk recognized her and greeted her.

Good morning Ms Fortune, How are you?' Ignoring the greeting she said, 'I've come to see Corporal Collins' He hesitated and said.

'I'm sorry ma'am visitors are not permitted to see the prisoner.' Not put off by his refusal, Stella reached into her bag and handed him a piece of paper. On it she had written the details of the phone call she had had with the sergeant. He read it slowly.

'Mmm,' he said. 'Excuse me a moment,' and he disappeared into the back. A few minutes later sergeant Craddock appeared.

'Good Morning Ms Fortune you have come to see Collins?'

'Yes please, I made an appointment a few days ago.'

'Yes I remember, we have a record of it. If you wait a moment I will bring him to the Visitors room where you can speak to him. Please don't touch or give him anything. Someone will be observing you through a one way mirror.'

Stella struggled to remain relaxed. She had waited such a long time to confront Jamie. But now she hesitated. What will I say? I

mustn't lose my temper. I must stay calm. But will I be able to control myself? She could already feel the anger boiling up inside her. Then the sergeant reappeared,

'Follow me please.'

Stella followed him down some stairs and into a small poorly lit room. It had one small window, which hadn't been cleaned for ages and there was a desk and two chairs.

'Please sit there,' he said pointing to a chair, 'Collins will be here shortly.'

Stella wiped the dust off the chair with her hand before sitting. It rocked a bit as if some screws were loose. Settling herself she waited uncertain what was to happen. Then the door opened and Jamie came in. He was unshaven and hunched as he shuffled to the other chair. She noticed his hands were shaking and his lower lip trembling. What had happened to him, he was a shadow of his former self. He had aged and looked so forlorn, so lost that in that instance all her anger fled and what she felt was sorrow. How could he have changed so much?

'Hello Jamie,' she said softly. 'How are you?' He grunted. He seemed not to be there. He had a vacant look in his eyes as if he was locked inside himself, as if he had built a wall to blot out the world.

Strangely she felt an impulse to hug him; he was so desolate and alone. Then

she thought, was this only the effect of being imprisoned or could he be suffering from some sort of mental illness? She tried to make small talk but he seemed to be lost in his own thoughts.

After staying for a few minutes, she got up and left. Reluctantly she could see that there was no purpose in discussing the incident or anything else with him in his state.

‘Goodbye Jamie, I hope you will feel better soon,’ and she walked out. Sergeant Craddock was waiting for her

‘How did it go?’

‘Not good, he looked terrible. Is there something wrong with him? Do all prisoners become so withdrawn and locked in? He looks as if he doesn’t know where he is?’

‘Yes, I agree he has changed from the man I remember seeing after the incident.’

‘Do you think he could be ill?’

‘I don’t know miss I’m not a doctor.’

As soon as she could Stella went to see David in the hospital. She hadn’t seen him for a few days and was amazed at how much he had improved. He was now sitting out of bed, the colour had returned to his features and he was animated and talkative. His mother was by the bedside. She and Stella had become quite close during

David's hospitalization. They greeted each other warmly. Stella was pleased to see that Mrs Collins looked much more relaxed and even smiled at David's jokes. During the morning when David was having some attention and they were asked to wait outside Stella cornered her and told her about the visit to see Jamie.

'He looked ill that's the only word, withdrawn almost inarticulate. He had a tremor and had aged. I am worried about him He had changed so much; it can't just be due to being locked up? I can't believe that. What do you think?'

'I don't know I'm no doctor,' she replied.

Later sitting with David, Stella's mind began to wander. Both the sergeant and Mrs Collins had said that they were not doctors. Perhaps that's what I should do, get him seen by a doctor. The more she thought about it the more sense it made. I'm sure they wouldn't stop a doctor from seeing him?

At home she made a phone call to the Sergeant at the police Station. He said they would have no objection as long as the doctor was a properly registered Physician.

Stella racked her brains to try and remember the name of the doctor who saw David in the pub. She knew it was a colour but which

one. Fortunately she had taken the phone number of the Pub's landlord and phoned him. He remembered the incident.

'How is he doing? Is he still paralysed?' He asked.

'Yes I'm afraid he is. He had a major spinal operation but so far there has been no improvement.'

'Hang on I'll get the number.' There was a pause, and then he read it out. 'It was Dr Brown 1234567. When you see David please send him our best wishes for a speedy recovery.'

As soon as she got home, Stella rang the Police station and asked to speak to Sergeant Craddock. He answered.

'This is Ms Fortune; you will remember I expressed concern about the medical condition of Jamie Collins?'

'Just a minute Ms Fortune,' Sergeant Craddock interrupted, 'there has been a change. Collins is no longer here; he has been transferred to Doncaster prison. He is on remand there pending a hearing at the Magistrate's court.'

'I see thank you.' she replied.

What do I do now? She wondered. It was rapidly getting out of hand. Should I just give up and walk away and let the system decide?

After a number of sleepless nights, she decided she couldn't let that happen. I need to know the answer. I know I'll ask Dr Brown to see him in the prison and at least confirm or otherwise my suspicions.'

A call from Dr Brown a week later surprised her. He confirmed that Jamie was ill.

'I am not an expert but I am convinced that Jamie is suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD),' he said. 'I think he needs treatment. I tried to see the Governor but was not allowed.'

'Aren't the prison medical staff treating him?' asked Stella.

'No, I don't think they have seen that he's ill, there are an awful lot of prisoners there so it's easy for them to miss one.'

Stella was feeling anxious about David. In her concern about Jamie in prison she had lost touch with him. A quick call to his mother reassured her that he was making progress but there had been no improvement in his legs. She arranged to visit the following weekend.

David looked so much better when Stella visited him in hospital that Sunday afternoon. He was in a ward of eight and as she came in wearing a summer dress, which showed off her sun-tanned legs, there were wolf whistles with shouts of 'lucky you

David'. Stella blushed, waved and smiled at them. She found him sitting in a wheel chair by the side of his bed. He had lost that sallow look and had put on some weight. As she sat down she gave David a peck on the cheek, it just seemed the right thing to do but caused everyone to clap and David to blush. There was an embarrassed silence between them before Stella spoke.

'Hello David, how are you?'

'I'm fine really, getting on well. The boys here have been a great support.'

'What about the legs?' Stella hesitated to ask.

'Nothing yet but I'm hopeful.

Everybody says you mustn't give up hope but it's not easy.' Changing the subject Stella said,

'Do you fancy a trip outside in the garden it's a lovely day?' He nodded.

She helped him to get comfortable in his chair, wrapped a blanket around his knees and pushed him into the Remembrance garden. It had been laid out near a small fountain around which were beds of roses, hybrids and floribunda. They were now in bloom and their scent was attracting many varieties of butterflies. Stella stopped David's chair opposite the fountain and they sat enjoying the tranquillity and calm, listening to the falling water.

As if she wasn't there, David began to reminisce talking quietly to himself.

'It seems incomprehensible that not such a long time ago, I was sitting at a bar having a drink when my life changed. How could I have not been more streetwise? What a stupid thing to do, to lean back and to fall? If only I could play back my life? It all happened so quickly I never believed that anything like this could happen to me.'

Stella's heart was breaking as she listened to David's frantic ravings. She wanted desperately to help but was powerless. She wanted to clasp him in her arms like a baby and make it better but she knew she couldn't. She waited and slowly David returned to reality.

'Sorry Stella I sometimes get so angry with myself, too stuck in my head.'

Suddenly Stella thought of Jamie and his ensuing court case.

'David I don't know how you feel about this but Jamie is soon going on trial. Have you considered that?'

'Yes a lot, I'm so mixed up, one part of me wants him punished but the other says will punishing him bring back my legs? Now that they think he is ill maybe I should ask to have the case dropped.'

Stella was afraid he might want that to happen so she had made some enquiries

about the seriousness of Jamie's actions and was told the situation.

'David, she said, 'I don't think you can. He's on a charge of GBH- Grievous Bodily Harm, a criminal charge. I think it's now out of your hands.'

Jamie was furious. He had been woken before dawn, ordered to dress warmly given a cup of weak tea and a piece of dried bread and told he was going to court. If that was not enough he was packed into a police van with 6 others and driven at break neck speed to the Court where he was crowded into a small cell beneath the court. There he fumed as the hours ticked by. He was indignant to be stashed up with the dregs of the earth as he described them, petty thieves, drug pushers and the like. By the time he appeared in court he was ready to burst.

'Name!' blurted out the Court Officer.

Jamie said nothing.

'Your name,' repeated the officer.

Jamie remained silent. He's going to ask me politely he decided. I'm not just one of them; I'm a Corporal in the Queen's army. I deserve respect.

Meanwhile the judge was fast losing his patience.

'Corporal,' he said sarcastically, 'if you don't give the court your name, I will lock you up for contempt.'

‘Corporal Jamie Collins Sir,’ he retorted coming to attention.

‘Corporal Collins, you have been accused of causing Grievous Bodily Harm, how do you plead?’

‘Not guilty Sir,’ he replied.

‘Take him away. He will appear in the Crown Court in four week’s time.’

Jamie turned smartly, clicked his heels and followed the officer out of the court.

Three months had passed since David’s injury. He had waited patiently for signs of recovery. Try as he might he couldn’t get his legs to move. He stroked and pricked his skin but he couldn’t feel anything.

Reluctantly he had to accept that there had been no improvement in his paralysis.

He was now independent in his wheel chair, able to deal with his normal functions and was physically ready for discharge. At the usual morning round Mr Thomas the surgeon raised the subject.

‘How do you feel about leaving us David? We think you’re ready to be independent.’ David had watched as his ward mates had one by one said goodbye and been replaced by new patients. He knew the day would come when it was his turn but he dreaded it. He couldn’t imagine being on his own struggling through the day.

‘I don’t know Sir,’ he choked. ‘I don’t know if I’m ready.’ Mr Thomas knew what was going through David’s mind. He had had this conversation many times before and always got the same initial response, fear, uncertainty and the dread of loneliness.

During his work with spinal patients, he had acquired the greatest respect for these young men and women embarking on a new and unknown life. He admired their bravery, their ability to adapt, to accept and to build a new life despite enormous challenges and restrictions. So he never tried to discharge anyone too soon, each had to find his own strength and choose his own time.

Unknown to David, Stella had had this conversation with his social worker and together they had formulated a plan. She had arranged for his house to be modified. A stair lift was installed together with a walk-in shower with low taps, a hoist over his bed, an automatic toilet and all switches at shoulder level. She and the physiotherapist had walked through the house checking that all was in place and working.

The subject came up during one of her visits. David looking sad and confused raised it.

‘Mr Thomas came yesterday and said that he thought I was set for discharge. I was

a bit surprised that he thought I was ready. I feel so unprepared for the outside world. I can't live anywhere I have to have a lot of modifications. What do you think?'

Stella was prepared for the question.

'I think you would manage just fine once all the modifications have been installed. Why don't you give it a try? You could stay overnight and gradually build up your confidence. Look let's go and look at your house tomorrow and we could make a list of what needs doing.'

The following day Stella set off with David, with his wheelchair safely stowed in her boot. The first thing David noticed when they arrived at his house was that the front path had been altered. There was now a gentle slope up to his front door. Opening the door he saw the stair lift and then the wide space that allowed him to navigate the downstairs. He wheeled himself around opening cupboards and turning switches on and off. By this time he was incredulous. He kept on looking at Stella and saying,

'Stella you're wonderful, when did you do all this?'

David was well established in his modified home when the date for the case against Jamie Collins was announced. Stella was in her salon when one of her customers read it in the newspaper and called her over. She

knew that it was only a matter of time before it would be heard, but she hated the publicity she was getting. They kept on referring to him as her ex-boyfriend.

‘Stella listen to this, here’s some news which might interest you. The crown court is sitting next Monday to try your ex-boy friend Jamie. It says they expect him to be sent away for at least ten years.’

When she got home she dropped into David next door. She usually took him his dinner or they ate together. He was listening to the news on the radio and was due to attend as a witness. He was still in two minds whether to attend the court. He couldn’t shake from his mind a feeling of guilt as if in some way his presence in the pub was responsible for Jamie’s actions. He mentioned it to Stella.

‘Ridiculous,’ she exploded. ‘How did you arrive at that fatuous conclusion? You must decide what you do but whatever you decide please get rid of the idea that you had any responsibility for Jamie’s action. Remember he is an independent person with free choice. People don’t act by reflex. He knew what he was doing.’

The news of the case had even reached London. The Times ran an article headed ‘The Iraq war reaches Yorkshire.’ Their foreign correspondent was describing

modern Shell shock now renamed Post Traumatic Stress Disease (PTSD). He wrote that many soldiers returning from the Iraq war were subjected to PTSD. It usually developed within months of the traumatic event and most frequently presented as flashbacks, insomnia and nightmares, angry outbursts and depression.

Mr Roger Drake had been selected by the court to defend Jamie. He was a man in his sixties, a tall upright figure with a small moustache and goatee beard. He wore a dark suit, which seemed to make him tower over everyone. He was from the old school and had been a soldier himself before he took up law. He was well versed in defending army personnel.

Their first meeting didn't go well. Jamie tried to bluff his way.

When he was asked for his story he said, 'I can't understand what's all the fuss about. I didn't touch the man and in any way there's nought wrong with him so why am on trial?' He continued to suggest that David was shamming.

Mr Drake stopped him, 'Listen Jamie I have spoken to the doctors. There is no doubt that David is paralysed and that it was caused by the

incident in the pub when you menaced him so let's not waste our time on your version.'

At the second meeting things had changed, Jamie had thought about his situation. They were now suggesting that he was ill and therefore not responsible for his actions.

'What I am proposing,' said Mr Drake, 'is that you plead guilty but with diminished responsibility due to PTSD.'

The Crown court was half empty when it convened to try Jamie Collins for Grievous Body Harm. It was not a subject that attracted the public. They didn't want to hear that soldiers committed crimes.

Promptly at 10 am the court officer announced,

'The Crown Court is now in session, His Lordship Judge Colin Meadows adjudicating.'

Jamie, looking strained but defiant was brought into the court handcuffed between two prison officers. He stood at attention before he was directed to sit next to his counsel Mr Roger Drake.

Immediately Mr Drake rose.

'May it please your lordship, I request that my client be freed from his hand cuffs.'

The judge nodded and the cuffs were removed.

There was a pause as the court secretary set up her recording machine. She nodded to the Judge that she was ready.

Ms Deidre Fellows stood up, a tall slim figure dressed in black.

‘Your Honour, I am acting for the Crown in this case.’

‘Thank you Ms Fellows, please give the court your introductory submission,’ requested the Judge.

‘Your honour, it is the submission of the Crown that on the agreed date the accused Corporal Jamie Collins, an active member of her Majesty’s Armed Forces did cause Grievous Bodily Harm contrary to Section 47 of the Offences against the Person Act 1861, to David Alsop resulting in severe injury. The prosecution will show that the accused did knowingly and intentionally cause such bodily harm.’

‘Please call your first witness.’

‘I call Peter Broadman the Publican of the King’s arms.’

A stocky man wearing a well-worn suit and tie walked slowly to the stand and waited, He was clearly very uncomfortable fidgeting with his tie, an unaccustomed piece of clothing. He took the oath whispering the words.

‘Please be seated and tell the court your name and occupation.’

‘My name is Peter Broadman and I am the landlord of the Kings Head.’

‘Mr Broadman please tell the court what happened at your pub on the relevant night.’

‘Yes sir, Your Honour it was a Friday night one of our busiest nights. David Alsop was sitting at the far end of the bar nursing a drink. He was one of my regulars, he always came in on Friday after the day’s work.’

‘Yes yes, Mr Broadman please continue,’

‘I was behind the bar when the accused Jamie Collins came in. I hadn’t seen him before. He ordered a drink and began talking to some of the other regulars about his army experiences. I then went into the back, into the kitchen to fetch something when I heard a commotion. I heard someone shout.’

‘Who let that Iraqi in here? Get him out of here, he’s been trying to screw my girl.’ I came out to see Mr Collins leaning over David, who was then lying on the floor shouting in pain,

‘I can’t feel my legs.’

‘Did you see Mr Collins hit David?’

‘Eh, no not exactly.’

‘What happened then?’

‘Dr Brown also a regular came into the pub at that moment and took charge. He...’

'No Mr Broadman don't say anything more. I will be putting Dr Brown on the stand. Thank you Mr Broadman. No further questions. Please stay on the stand the defence may want to question you.'

'Mr Drake?'

'Yes! Your Honour, Mr Broadman, just to make it clear to the jury, did you actually see Mr Collins touch or hit Mr Alsop.'

'No Your Honour.'

'Thank you no more questions'

Ms Fellows said,

'I would like to call Sergeant Craddock.'

A burly uniformed man walked smartly to the bench and stood to attention. He took the oath.

'My name is Sergeant Craddock. I am the sergeant on duty at the Doncaster Police Station.

'Sergeant please tell the court what happened on the day you learned about the CCTV tape.'

'Your honour about two weeks after the relevant incident, I was invited to go to the Kings Head Pub to see and hear a CCTV tape. When I arrived I confirmed that the recording had been made on the relevant night. I sat and it was played for me.'

‘Please confirm that the tape we are about to hear is the same one that you heard.’

‘I confirm that it is.’

‘Thank you Sergeant, you may sit down. I would like permission to play the tape to the court,’ requested Ms Fellows. The judge nodded and sat back to watch.

The tape began with a hiss and then the picture appeared. It showed Collins shouting and going towards David with his fist clenched. David could be seen trying to avoid the blow and then they heard the sound of David falling backwards and his scream of pain. The tape suddenly came to an end.

There was a grim silence in the court; even the officers who were used to seeing horrifying images were stunned.

The judge tapped his gavel.

‘I think this is a good time to have a short recess.’

The court reconvened twenty minutes later.

‘Do you have any more witnesses to hear Ms Fellows?’ Asked the judge as he sat down

‘Yes your Honour, I would like to call My David Alsop.

Stella was sitting behind David; she leaned forwards and whispered,

‘Are you OK David?’

She had watched his face as the CCTV tape was played. It was the first time he had seen it and was clearly very upset by it. She saw his face screw up as he placed his hands on his forehead. She couldn’t imagine what torture he was going through reliving the moment when his life was turned upside down.

He nodded,

‘It’s OK I knew it would be difficult but I’m glad I came. I knew Ms Fellows wanted me to give evidence. That’s going to be tough but I want to do it, I want the court to hear what it’s like being paralysed.’

David took the stand. He was unable to enter the box and wheeled his chair just in front of it. He took the oath.

Ms Fellows walked slowly up to the witness box and rested her hand lightly on the back of David’s chair.

‘Mr Alsop,’ she said, ‘Tell the court about your life before the assault.’

‘Objections Your Honour,’ shouted Mr Drake, ‘Ms Fellows is prejudging the decision of the Jury by using the word ‘assault’.

‘Ms Fellows’ the judge said. ‘Please choose a less provocative word.’

‘Yes your honour, Mr Alsop please tell the court about your life before the,’ and she paused, ‘the accident.’

‘Your Honour, I was a graphic designer with my own business. I had just moved from the family home into my own house. I enjoyed many activities including squash once a week, football once a week and the occasional round of golf.’

‘Did you have any medical condition requiring regular medication?’

‘No your Honour I enjoyed very good health.’

‘Please Mr Alsop, I understand that this may be difficult but how has your life changed since the accident?’

David paused. He had prepared for this question but when it came, it still caused him to hesitate. He had not yet accepted that he would always be wheelchair bound but he knew he would be. Finally he blurted out,

‘I am now a cripple.’

As she heard him say the word, Stella moaned and put her hands to her mouth.

‘I am confined to a wheel chair and have no control of my bladder or bowels. I cannot feel my legs. I cannot move my legs. I suffer from spasms that wake me at night.’

The court went quiet. It was the first time that most had appreciated the actual disability of a paralysed person.

'I know this is going to be difficult but please tell the court in your own words what happened on that fateful day,' continued Ms Fellows.

'I had gone to the pub on Friday as usual. I had ordered a drink and was sitting on a stool at the far end of the bar enjoying it and talking to some friends when the,' he paused. He wanted to say 'assault' but was told to use a more neutral word, 'the incident occurred.'

'What do you remember of the incident?'

'I remember Collins shouting at me, calling me an Iraqi. He then came towards me with his fist clenched preparing to hit me.'

'What did you do?'

'I tried to get away from him and leaned backwards.'

'What happened then?'

'I lost my balance and fell heavily against the arm of a chair that was just behind me.'

'Was that when you were paralysed?'

'Yes I fell to the ground and I felt a severe pain in my back and lost the feeling in my legs.'

'Thank you Mr Alsop I have no more questions.'

As Ms Fellows sat down, Mr Drake stood.

‘Mr Alsop, I am very conscious of how difficult this has been but I would like to ask you one more question. Did Mr Collins actually strike you?’

‘No.’

‘Thank you, no further questions.’

‘Mr Alsop you may return to your place,’ said the judge

‘Ms Fellows, if that is the end of your submission? Will the defence please proceed.’

Mr Drake rose

‘Your Honour, I would like to call Professor Hussain Mallick.’

A tall bearded man with silver hair, and a dark complexion walked slowly to the stand and took the oath.

‘Please tell the Court your full name, occupation and qualifications.’

‘I am Professor Hussain Mallick, Professor of Psychology at the University of London. I have a MBBS, PhD and DPM.’

‘Thank you Professor, you have heard the account of the incident in the pub. You have seen the CCTV and you have examined the accused. Please give the court your opinion concerning the culpability of the accused.’

‘Yes Your Honour, I would like to start with Mr Collin’s history. He told me that he had had a difficult upbringing being one of

three children to a single mother. He never knew his father. At the age of 18 he joined the army. He said that he was the first member of his family to do so; he joined it to get away from them. He enjoyed the army and made a number of friends. He has had a distinguished career culminating in being sent to Iraq with the rank of corporal.

'I wanted him to tell you in his own words his experience in Iraq when captured but it is still too raw in his memory. So I will describe it. He told me that he was captured by an Iraqi platoon, tortured and starved. One particular Iraqi officer who spoke perfect English tormented him, humiliating him and belittled him. Eventually a platoon from his own regiment freed him. He spent four weeks in hospital before being sent home. He showed me scars on his back and legs caused by the torture he sustained.'

'Since returning to the UK he has had flashbacks, nightmares, Irritability and angry outbursts. He has been advised to seek treatment but feels that he should be able to overcome his problems himself. He is a proud man.'

'Together these symptoms constitute what used to be called Shell shock but which as we have come to understand them better, are called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.'

'It is my opinion that the outburst that occurred that night in the pub that resulted in

the injury to Mr Alsop was due to the severe psychological disorder of PTSD.'

'Thank you Professor. Ms Fellows do you have any questions for the witness?'

'Yes just one, Professor are you telling the court that in your opinion Collins was not responsible for the injury to Mr Alsop?'

'Not at all, his actions clearly resulted in the injury to Mr Alsop. What I am saying is that, at that moment that he saw Alsop who with his dark complexion looked in the shadow like an Iraqi, he suffered a sudden flashback. It was as if he was back on the front in Iraq facing the enemy whom he confused with Mr Alsop. He was blinded by rage and the wish to retaliate.'

'I think this is a good time to have a recess. When the court reconvenes I will call for the summing up submissions.' said the Judge.

Stella waited until most people had cleared the court before she came forwards and began to wheel David out of the courtroom and to the canteen. Both were stunned by the proceedings and needed time to collect their senses. It was David who spoke first.

'I didn't understand the Professor. Was he saying that Collins was not guilty?'

‘No I don’t think so. What I understood he was saying was that Collins was guilty but not responsible.’

‘Does that mean that he will get away with it?’

‘I don’t know, I think we will have to wait and see.’

‘Stella, do you mind if I don’t come into the court this afternoon? I have found the whole thing so upsetting; I’m really bushed and need to rest.’

The afternoon session started promptly at 2 pm. The jury filed in and settled themselves before Ms Fellows rose and faced them.

‘Ladies and Gentlemen, the case before you is one of Grievous Bodily Harm (GBH). Prior to 1993 it was necessary for the accused to have touched the victim for the charge to be made but in 1993 the law was clarified and since that date the Law Lords have ruled that it is no longer necessary to have touched the other person for one to be guilty of GBH. If by your action, the victim suffers serious bodily harm then the charge of GBH stands.’

‘You have heard the statements of the witnesses and have heard and seen the CCTV footage and know exactly what happened on that fateful day. It is the submission of the prosecution that by his action, Collins is guilty of GBH.’

‘The question that arises is whether he knowingly and deliberately carried out the assault or was he in such a frame of mind that he was unaware of what he was doing? The account given by Professor Mallick clearly traced the sequence of events up to and beyond the offence. He is of the opinion that Collins was suffering from the condition of PTSD at the time of the incident.

If you are persuaded by that argument then you must find the accused not guilty but if you have any doubts about that causation and I believe you should then you must find the accused guilty.’

Ms Fellows returned to her seat, and Mr Drake rose.

‘Ladies and Gentlemen, you have heard the eloquent statement by my honourable friend outlining the features of this case. She has defined the crime of GBH of which my client is accused. She has also repeated the opinion of the Professor who is clearly of the mind that the accused was suffering from PTSD at the time of the incident.’

‘Let’s briefly recall the sequence of events. Collins enters the pub to see a figure of possibly middle-eastern descent seated at the bar. As an Iraqi war veteran, he suffered sorely at the hands of men who look very similar to the victim. The pub was noisy, with men’s voices raised. It was necessary to

shout to be heard, a one armed bandit was flashing and a fire was blazing in the hearth.'

'For a moment Collins thought he was back in Iraq in the war zone with loud voices, flashing lights and flames, all features of war he had been familiar with. Then he saw what he took to be an Iraqi and shouted, 'what's he doing here?' For a brief moment he had lost touch with reality and was now in his own world. He reacted as trained and attacked.'

'Is that the action of a mindless criminal or of a man who through his war experience had become momentarily unhinged? If you agree with this explanation then you must find the accused not guilty by virtue of insanity.'

The jury sat back in their chairs, the strain of trying to follow the legal arguments clearly visible on their faces. No one relished the task ahead.

It was four days later that the Jury emerged with a hung verdict. Mrs Brewen the chair lady later gave an interview to the press:

The jury met the Judge 'in camera'. He began,

'Firstly Ladies and Gentlemen I would like to thank you all for the hard work you have done to determine the verdict in this

case. I know it has not been easy. Difficult as it is, you must disregard the severity of the injury to Alsop. You must deal with the principal. So even if he had only broken his leg and had recovered fully, the same fundamentals would have applied. Basically you must decide whether Collins knew what he was doing or was he at the moment 'out of his mind'

Two days later the jury filed back into the court. The judge asked the spokesman.

'Have you arrived at a verdict?'

'Yes your honour,' he said handing a small piece of paper to the Official the judge read it nodded and said

'How do you determine?'

'Guilty but Insane.'

A voice from the back of the court shouted,

'Rubbish, the bastard knew what he was doing. Bang him up for life.'

A young man with a pacifist logo on his T-shirt shouted as he was bundled out of the court.

'The Court is adjourned until Monday when the verdict will be announced.' Called out the Court Officer as the public filed out.

Collins was immediately hand cuffed and marched off to the cell below to await his return to prison. There the verdict soon spread around. On his arrival Collins was

hailed as a hero who had duped the screws. Prisoners shook their railings, banged their metal mugs and generally celebrated, shouting,

'Good on you Jamie we're with you.'

Stella was dreading facing David. She thought that he would take the verdict very badly but she was pleasantly surprised how well he received it.

'It doesn't make me worse,' he muttered philosophically, 'and it doesn't make me better.' What Stella wasn't aware was that David was really afraid of his next appointment with the surgeon. It was due in a week's time after the court case had concluded.

David had had a bad night; he tossed and turned unable to get comfortable. He kept on going over in his mind the speech he was invited to give to the Court the following day. He was in two minds, one said that it would make no difference any way and the other was that they should hear what it was like to be a victim of someone else's actions.

In the end he decided to give it. Should he write it out in full and read it or just make notes and rely on his memory to fill the gaps. Finally he fell asleep still undecided. By the morning he knew what to do. I'll just tell it as it is. I need to get it off my

chest and tell them how frustrated and indignant I am about the whole damn law.

Stella and David had breakfast together but neither spoke. She helped him select the clothes he would wear. He wanted to look smart but not overdressed. In the end he wore an open neck white shirt, dark trousers and leather shoes. He spent twenty minutes polishing his shoes. He always wore highly polished leather shoes to any important event; shoes say so much about a person he believed.

Time seemed to drag until they were ready to go to the court. It would be convening at the usual time of 10am.

No sooner had everyone settled down than Ms. Fellows rose.

‘Your Honour my client David would like to say something to the court before the Jury gives its sentence.’

‘Please do Mr Alsop.’

‘Your Honour, ladies and gentlemen, I have sat through the many days of this trial imprisoned here in my wheel chair. I have listened to the learned arguments concerning blame and responsibility and throughout I have been reassured by my belief that the punishment should fit the crime. But as the facts emerged it appeared

that the verdict was being influenced by the effect of a war fought thousands of miles away from here, a war that I as an individual opposed.'

'Yet if it is to be believed, that war was the background to the behaviour that led to my crippling. That war became an octopus stretching its poisoned tentacles into my life.'

'The bedrock of British justice was I thought that the punishment should fit the crime but there is no way on earth that any punishment meted out to that man can ever be equalized against the crime he has committed against me. He in a moment of anger took the essence of what it is to be human away from me. He stole my right to an independent existence, imprisoning me for the rest of my life. At the pinnacle of my vitality, he committed me to a life of struggle, compromise and pain.

And now I hear that it wasn't his fault, that he was as much a victim as I, that the war damaged him and deranged his otherwise normal behaviour, converting him at moments of stress into a voracious animal seeking only revenge.'

'Ladies and gentlemen, how can you in all honesty make the punishment fit the crime?'

The silence in the court was suddenly broken by a single hand clap, Stella, with her face drained and her mascara ruined by tears rolling down her cheeks started it. Slowly the clapping spread until the whole room was resounding with the sound. The judge had never had this happen before. He was surprised by this unexpected response but did nothing to stop it. In that moment he realised that it was the outpourings of ordinary men and women acknowledging the tragedy and pain of life and saluting the man who resolutely refused to give up, a true hero.

He waited until the clapping stopped and began his summing up.

‘I was deeply moved by Mr Alsop’s statement and can as a fellow human being only commiserate with him in what seems to be an unfair decision yet it is what twelve men and women have decided after due consideration.’

‘It is my conclusion that the accused Jamie Collins should be taken from this place to a facility for psychologically disturbed people and remain there under custody for a minimum of five years, during which time he will be under the supervision of a psychiatric team. After five years he will

be eligible for parole subject to a favourable report.'

He banged his gavel.

'The Court is now adjourned,' called the Officer.

David turned to look at Stella,

'That's it I suppose let's go home. The next hurdle is going to be the worst. I think I know what the surgeons are going to say.'

'C'mon David don't be so pessimistic, It's only 6 months. He said you could continue to improve for up to two years.'

'I know but will I?'

David and Stella arrived early for his appointment and sat in the small waiting room. It had changed since he was last there. The walls were now brightly painted. There were fresh flowers on the table and some magazines in the rack and

'What an improvement?' said Stella reaching for the Woman's magazine? Do you want something to read? She asked David

'Is there a sport's one?'

'Yes, it's called Marathon.' She said handing it to him.

David opened it and began to scan the photos. They were from the Beijing para-Olympics. He read about Donald West, born

with paraplegia. It said that when he was a child he remembered watching the London marathon and decided he wanted to do something like that.

At that moment the surgery door opened,
‘Good morning David and Stella
please come in.’

As soon as they were seated, Mr Thomas
began to run through David’s history.

‘It’s now six months since the
accident. How are you getting on?’

‘I’m Ok but I am disappointed that my
legs are just as weak. I haven’t had any
improvement surely I should have had some
by now if, ‘ and he stopped,’ his face
dropped. ‘Am I going to be like this all my
life?’

‘David I wish I could be more positive
but I think there is going to be very little if
any change in the future, I’m sorry.’

David was very quiet on the way home; he
didn’t invite Stella in but just said,

‘Thank you for taking me,’ and went in
doors. She heard his door lock.

Just before she went to work in the morning,
Stella usually checked on David by calling
through their communal door, He would
usually shout,

‘Fine, have a good day see you later.’
Today he was silent. She thought he must be asleep so she decided not to disturb him; I’ll speak to him when I get home. During the day she thought about him and was a little unsure. She thought that she should phone him but forgot to because of pressure of work.

Arriving home that evening she knocked on his front door. She heard movements and a gruff,

‘Go away, leave me alone,’

She felt a sudden tearing at her heart. What’s going on? He sounded terrible She called again but this time there was no answer. Now she was really frightened. What can I do? I must call someone. She phoned David’s mother but there was no reply she must be out. Then she remembered Brian, the friend from David’s ward.

She searched in her bag and found her address book and dialled his number

‘Hello.’ came the reply.

‘Is that Brian?’

‘Yes who is that?’

‘ My name is Stella, we met when my friend David was in the bed next to you in the hospital.’

‘Are you that lovely girl with the amazing legs?’

'I guess so,' Stella said.

'What can I do for you?'

'I'm worried about David. He's locked himself in his house and won't let me in. I'm frightened he is going to do something stupid.'

'OK where does he live? I'll be right over.'

About twenty minutes later Brian's car drew up outside the house. Stella went to it and watched him as he got out and struggled onto his wheel chair.

'Hi,' he said shaking her hand. 'Where is he?'

She pointed to David's front door.

Brian wheeled himself up to the door and shouted,

'Hi David it's Brian, how are you?' He didn't wait for a reply. 'I was just passing by and thought I would pop in and see how my old buddy is doing?' They heard a muffled,

'Not good, things aren't good.'

'Open the door and let's say hello.'

There was a shuffling sound and then a key turning in the lock and the door opened. In the dull light Stella could see that David was slumped in his wheel chair. The air was foetid. He hadn't shaved and looked wan and thin. His hair was scraggy and unkempt; he was trembling and could hardly speak.

Stella was shocked by what she saw. David's condition had deteriorated

enormously since she had last seen him. He was a shell of himself. Her immediate reaction was to call the doctor but she hesitated to see how he would react to Brian's visit. She could see that he was pleased to see Brian and soon they were talking freely. She decided to leave them and to catch up with Brian later.

When Stella had left, David said to Brian, 'I can't do this Brian. It's too difficult. I can't live like this. I would rather be dead.' Brian listened; he knew exactly what David was feeling, he had been there himself. He knew that it felt as if he was in a void alone trapped by his helplessness. Every movement required a colossal effort leaving him breathless and gasping for air. Brian had been a window cleaner before he fell of his ladder and lived most of his day outside so being restricted was like being in prison. He waited feeling David's pain.

'Come on old friend, you're on a journey. You're climbing a mountain. It makes you a bit breathless so you stop, gather yourself and plod on. Try and enjoy the struggle. When you reach the top the sun will be shining and you will see a glorious view. Let me help you I know the way.'

David smiled. He hadn't had a reason to try for a long time.

Brian's wisdom and support was miraculous. Soon Stella saw David begin to blossom, he put on weight, became talkative and began to venture out of doors. Her heart swelled when she saw how well he was doing.

As time passed she knew more and more that she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him but how to bring it up?

'Tell him,' she said to her mirror one morning. 'Tell him.' But it was not her way.

Then circumstances fell into her lap. She received a letter postmarked HMPS. She studied it but didn't recognize the writing and in any case no one sends letters these days. She opened it and to her absolute surprise it was from Jamie. She had often thought about him but was so disgusted and angry with him that she decided she never wanted to see him again. Then the letter arrived. It was in a large round handwritten script and filled a whole page. She held it and thought about him. How fate had played a part in their lives?

With her hands shaking she began to read.

Rampton Secure Hospital

Dear Stella,

It has taken me a long time to pluck up courage to write to you although I've wanted to do so for some time. How are

you? I miss you and am sorry that we are no longer talking to each other.

How is David? I've heard on the grape vine that he hasn't improved and is going to be chair bound for the rest of his life. I know I should write to him but I am not yet ready to do so. Please tell him how much I regret what happened in the Pub. I know the court decided that I was ill but I make no excuses. It was me that crippled him. Whatever way I say it, that is what happened and no matter what I do now, I cannot undo the damage.

Life here is not easy. Although it is an open prison, the regimen is very strict and must be followed. I have had a lot of counselling and psychiatric support and I think I am now much more in control of myself although I still get the occasional temper. I am learning to recognise what brings it on and avoid it.

I hope that one day I can come and see you both. I want to face David and tell him just how sorry I am that I was responsible for hurting him so badly.

Yours as Ever

Jamie

PS I would love to see you, visiting days are Tuesday and Thursday afternoon.

Stella put the letter down and sat thinking about it. It had taken Jamie a lot of courage

to write it. She knew that David would be pleased to see what he had written.

That evening after work, Stella dropped in to see David. She had the letter in her bag.

‘David something surprising happened this morning. I received a letter from Jamie,’ she began. He didn’t move and at first she thought he hadn’t heard and she began to repeat what she had said.

‘I heard the first time,’ he snapped. ‘What do you want me to say?’

‘Nothing I just thought you would be interested in what he had written?’

‘Why should I be? As far as I’m concerned he no longer exists.’

Stella hated it when David wallowed in self-pity. Having seen how Brian had put his life back together again she was dismayed at David’s refusal to accept what had happened and move on.

‘Ok let’s not talk about it anymore I’ll go and make some tea.’

As she left, she purposely dropped the letter on the floor. When he looked for the TV controller to watch the news, he saw it. His immediate reaction was to phone her and tell her but his inquisitiveness got the better of him. He reached down and retrieved the letter He stared at it for a while

trying to imagine what it said. The he took it out from the envelope and began reading.

When Stella brought in his tea he came clean and told her he had read the letter and how it made him feel.

She smiled,

‘You know, I dropped it on purpose. You had to read it to know what Jamie felt.’ She came forward and hugged him. He smelt her perfume and felt her softness. It was such a long time since someone had embraced him.

‘Stella,’ he said, his pulse racing. ‘I love you. I can’t tell how much you mean to me.’

She had waited so long to hear his say that.

‘I love you too. David. You have become very precious to me. I can’t imagine my life without you.’ David looked into her eyes. It was as if he was hearing a miracle, that this wonderful creature could love him.

‘I would like to visit Jamie would you come with me?’

‘I don’t know Stella. I don’t think I am yet ready to face him but please you go and thank him on my behalf for his words of regret.’

It was Thursday afternoon visiting time when Stella arrived at the gates of Rampton Secure Hospital and showed her

appointment card. She had been given a slot of one hour between 2 and 3 pm.

She was frisked and asked to sign a non-responsibility clause.

She was shown into a waiting room where there were a number of other visitors. A woman smiled at her,

'You're visiting your husband?' she asked.

'No just a friend, you?'

'My husband, he's been in here a long time and probably won't get out,' she paused, 'alive.'

'I'm sorry,' said Stella just as her name was called.

Jamie was already seated at a table when she came into the reception room. He stood up as she approached.

'Hi Stella,' he said leaning forwards to kiss her. She hesitated then they touched cheeks. 'You look well,' he continued. She watched him as he spoke. He looked good, tanned well shaven and dressed in a well-pressed white shirt, jeans and trainers.

They sat down facing each other. Neither spoke for a moment eyeing up the other Stella spoke first.

'Thank you very much for your letter, I was surprised to get it but on reading it I was so pleased that you had decided to write it.'

'Did you show it to David?'

‘He’s read it, yes. What’s strange is that once he had read it, I felt he had in some way changed.’

‘Changed? How do you mean?’

‘Well, he seemed to be brighter as if your apology had let him let go of his hate for you. That you were not the ogre he believed but that you had genuinely regretted what you had done.’

‘Would he come here?’

‘I asked him that question. He said he wasn’t ready yet which I think means that sometime in the future you two could meet.’

‘I would like that. I want to complete the circle, to tell him personally how mortified I am by what I did and to do anything I can to ease his burden.’

‘I’ll tell him that.’

‘Finally Stella, before you go I want to apologise to you. We were good pals and I screwed it up. I don’t blame you for walking away from me although I will regret it forever. I can see that you and David are now an item, good luck Stella.’

Abruptly Jamie got up turned and walked away He didn’t want her to see the tears in his eyes.

‘How did your visit go?’ asked David.

‘I think he has changed. All that bravado has gone or at least I didn’t see it.’ He seemed like his old self.

‘Are you falling for him?’ David joked.

‘No dear it’s you I love, he’s history.’

They kissed.

‘Are you sure you want to do this, get yourself hooked up to a cripple like me.’

‘David you know I hate you talking like that. You’re not a cripple your just semi-detached like this house.’ They both laughed. ‘By the way I want to do some alterations and restore this house to its original design, get rid of one staircase, join up the kitchens. It will be much easier for you to get about and easier for me to manage.’

David and Brian had been seeing a lot of each other. They started going to a gym nearby where there was a trainer called Steven Hobbs who had worked at Stoke Mandeville the first Spinal injuries Unit in the country. He knew all about Professor Sir Ludwig Guttmann who had established the unit in 1944. Sir Ludwig was an ardent believer in the importance of sport in the rehabilitation of the injured and especially the paralysed and in 1948 setup the first Stoke Mandeville Games, which became known as the Paralympics. By 1952 more than 130 international competitors entered the Stoke Mandeville Games.

David was very apprehensive when he was first introduced to Steven but was soon put at ease.

'Hi David, my name is Steven welcome to the class. I see Brian has come with you; he is one of my regulars. He has told me a little about you. I was sorry to hear your story but that is all in the past, what we are here to do today is to build the future. Do you have any particular activity that interests you?'

'Well yes, I saw a magazine some time ago about a man who races on a bike. I think his name was Donald West.'

'Yes, we all know Donald West. He's a phenomenon.'

'Have you tried riding a bike?' Asked Steven

'No but it looks fun. Could I get hold of one?'

'Yes you can hire them but you need to do a lot of training before you can get on one as you must strengthen certain groups of muscles.'

David was excited to get home and tell Stella about the sports club and bikes.

'I met this chap called Steven at the Gym. He is a trainer specialising in Spinal injury clients.' Brian introduced us. He seemed very switched on and I liked his open manner.'

'Do you think it is safe?'

'Sure why not? A lot of paraplegics race them. I have never heard of anyone

having an accident. I'm going to write to Donald West. I want to meet him and hear his story.'

Donald was in his Gym when he was handed a letter. *PERSONAL* was written on the envelope. He received a lot of fan mail so he thought it must be from a fan. He glanced through it, then realised it was not the usual letter. There was something about the language that attracted him. It was a cry for help from someone needed his assistance. He read it again slowly,

Dear Donald,

You don't know me but I read your amazing story in a magazine, I was blown away by your achievements on a bike. You have conquered the world. I want to do the same, not to win a Gold at the Olympics that is not likely to happen. I want to learn to race on a bike.

I know this is cheeky but would you come to our gym and talk to us. We are four paraplegics wanting to change our lives. We think you're the man who could help us.'

*Sincerely,
David Alsop*

Donald stuffed the letter in his pocket and continued with his training. That evening he showed it to his wife Judy.

‘Darling I got this letter out of the blue. What do you think I should do?’

Judy read it to herself and looked at him.

‘It’s a wonderful letter. I think you should offer to help them, don’t you?’

‘Yes I thought the same. Do you want to come with it could be fun? You haven’t been up north for a long time?’

‘Why not? It would give me a break from the office.’

Early next morning Judy and Donald were making good time travelling North on the M1. Judy was driving and Donald was navigating using the Satnav. It had been some while since they had been this way so both were a little uncertain of the route. After about an hour the Moto stop at Toddington was signed. Donald checked but there were no wheelchair facilities.

‘Shall I drive on?’ said Judy.

‘No I think we should stop I’m sure I can manage. If the worse comes to the worse you can bring a drink out to me in the car but let’s try, you never know, these guides are often out of date.’

Judy drove into the car park and stopped near the entrance to the building. She got out and lifted Donald’s wheel chair out of the boot and brought it around to the passenger’s seat so that Donald could slide

onto it. They were approaching the entrance to the building when Judy noticed there wasn't a ramp. At that moment two young men passed them. One glanced briefly at Donald and turned to his mate,

'I think that's Donald West you know the Paralympic gold medallist.

'Are you sure?

'Not certain, let's go back and ask him.

'Excuse me Sir, are you Donald West the Paralympic gold medallist?

Donald turned and saw the men.

'Yes I am,'

'Wow what amazing luck to meet you? You're my hero,' he said pumping Donald's hand. 'How are you Sir, do you need any help?'

'Well I could do with a lift to get me up those stairs.'

'Sure mate my friend and I would be happy to help.'

Judy watched as the two young men lifted Donald and his chair up the stairs as if he was as light as a feather.

'Thanks guys,' said Donald. I appreciate your help.

'No problem, it's been a privilege to meet you,' and they were gone.

The little incident did not go unnoticed. As soon as Judy wheeled Donald towards the

coffee bar people began to stop what they were doing and come over and say Hello. Within a few minutes there was quite a crowd milling around him. Children pushed to the front to touch his chair. One man came over, grabbed his hand and said, 'Donald, you are an inspiration to us all. After reading your story, I have never complained about anything since, thanks.'

Judy and Donald sat in silence as they proceeded North to Doncaster. They both felt visibly moved by the reception they had just had. It was Donald who broke the silence.

'In a strange way, Judy I'm glad I was born a cripple. I think if I had been normal and lost it, I would have a very different attitude. That is what I am going to say to the group in Doncaster, that it is easier for me because I never knew anything different.' As he was talking, he was beginning to formulate what he would say. He had spoken to groups many times before but this time it would be different.

They were all waiting for him when his car pulled up at the Gym, the three men and a girl sitting in their wheel chairs forming a guard of honour. Donald wheeled over and greeted each in turn when David spoke,

‘Donald we are honoured to have you visit us. We all know and admire your amazing achievements, We wonder if you would give us a brief talk on how you achieved it and what we need to do to become racing cyclists.’

They all went inside the gym and formed a circle around Donald. Judy sat on the side listening.

‘Before I begin I would like to know a little about each of you?’ Lets start with you young lady. Dorothy blushed and wheeled herself forwards.

‘My name is Dorothy I am 27 years old. I was paralysed three years ago when the car I was driving lost control on a greasy road. It spun into a nearby wood and I was thrown out. I know I should have been wearing a seat belt. I have regretted that ever since. I was paralysed from the waist down and was in hospital for six months. I guess you all know the rest of the story.’ She wheeled herself back in line with the others.

Brian wheeled forwards.

‘My name is Brian I am twenty-four. I was a window cleaner and fell off a ladder, I didn’t secure the base, a fundamental rule and it slipped.’

Charles spoke next,

‘I am Charlie I am forty-four, a truck driver. Like most of you I did something stupid. I was standing on the tailboard

unloading when I slipped and fell to the ground.

David then wheeled forwards and told his story

Donald then swung himself round and turned to face the group. He lifted himself up to his full height and spoke looking at each in turn.

‘All of you whatever the reason, have had your lives compromised. You have had to find the strength to overcome challenges which most people have never faced and have no idea. All of you by being here and wanting to extend your horizons are heroes in the truest manner. You represent the best and I am honoured to be amongst you.’

At that moment Stella came in and seeing Judy sat next to her. She whispered,

‘Hi, I’m Stella.’ David’s girlfriend

‘Hi, I’m Judy, Donald’s wife. I came up with him. Is David the guy that got attacked in the Pub?’

‘Yes.’

‘That was a bad business I’m so sorry.’

‘It’s all right, David is beginning to accept it but it hasn’t been easy.’

Donald was continuing.

‘I guess what you want to know is how I became an Olympic wheel cyclist?’

They nodded. 'I suppose I had an advantage on all of you. I have never had normal legs. I was born with a spinal deformity that paralysed my lower limbs so I have lived in one sort of chair or another all my life. What I have learned is that in order to control a racing bike you need superb trunk control which most of us don't have naturally. Your trainer is one of the best and will know that, so long before you think about racing you have to strengthen your musculature...'

During a pause in Donald's talk Stella whispered to Judy.

'Do you think I could have a word with you?'

Judy nodded and the two girls crept outside and sat on a seat in the garden. They could hear Donald droning on.

'I don't want to pry but I would like to know how you live with Donald and how did you, you know, get a baby, is it his?'

'Are you and David an item?' Judy asked.

'Not exactly, he doesn't want to talk about it. I would marry him tomorrow but he thinks I am throwing away my life.'

'Donald was also very apprehensive about marrying me. He couldn't see how it would work, he being so dependant but it does. We have our moments like all couples but we love each other and work them out.'

‘About the other matter, yes she is ours. I’ll give you the address of a doctor who advised us. It’s much simpler that you think.’

The two women returned to the Gym to hear Donald summing up.

‘So my friends I wish you every success in your wheel chair racing.’

David speaking on behalf of the others thanked Donald for taking time to come and speak to them. He and Judy wished them farewell as they made their way back south. Stella and David said goodbye to the others and went home.

Stella was at work when a policeman appeared at the studio door.

‘Excuse me is there a Stella Fortune working here?’

Stella heard her name and went to the door.

‘Yes officer, I’m Stella how can I help you?’

‘I’m sorry to tell you but David Alsop has been involved in an accident and is in the A&E Department at the local hospital.’

‘Oh my God! Is he all right?’

‘I don’t know, I have no further information.’

Stella dropped everything and rushed to the department. She dashed into his ward.

David looking pale and weak was lying in a bed. She rushed over to him.

‘David are you all right, what happened?’

‘I fell off the wheelchair. I was racing in the park when my chair hit a dip in the path and tipped. I lost control and hit a tree. But I’m Ok, it’s just a bruise. I’ll be OK, I want to go home.’

‘Has the doctor seen you?’

‘Yes he wants an x-ray.’

‘David let’s wait and have the x-ray.’

‘Stella please. It doesn’t hurt now so what is the x-ray going to show. Please Stella let’s go home.’

‘OK David have your own way. You know better than the doctors?’

Stella looked in on David as usual the following morning on her way to work. She found him still in bed.

‘David you haven’t got up?’

‘No I thought I would have a lie in.’

‘OK I’ll see you later I’ll ring at lunchtime to see how your are.’

As soon as she had gone David tried to sit up but his left leg seemed to bend where it shouldn’t. He couldn’t feel any pain but when he felt the area it was swollen. He layback realising that he had been a fool. There was something wrong and he was going to have to admit it to Stella. She would go mad with

anger. He struggled to get up onto his chair but fell back exhausted. The leg just hung heavily and stopped him.

As usual Stella popped it to see him before she made supper. To her surprised he was still in bed. She felt a chill of fear, was there something seriously wrong with him. Her look of concern made him confess.

‘Stella darling you were right; I’ve been an obstinate fool. I did hurt myself badly yesterday and should have had an X-ray I’m sorry.’ Stella stood there fuming.

‘Oh David you are going to be the death of me. Please just humour me if I worry, just do as I say. You know its because I love you and want you to recover as much as possible.’

The X-ray showed a fracture of the right leg below the knee. It was a simple break in a bone that was already fragile from the disuse of the paralysis. The treatment was straightforward. A cast was applied from David’s thigh to his foot. He was pleased that it was made from one of the newer materials, which was quite lightweight. When he returned to the gym with his leg sticking out on a frame, the others crowded round. Soon he heard that this was a common problem. Each had his or her own story of a fall or twist.

But Stella was now much more concerned when he went out, never quite certain if he would return in one piece.

As soon as she could she phoned Judy. The two women had kept in touch.

'Hi Stella,' replied Judy. Good to hear from you. How's everything?'

'Well not good, that's why I'm ringing you. David broke his leg I am so worried.'

'Oh that's nothing they all do it. Their leg bones are very fragile but they heal well. Really it's nothing to worry about. How's his cycling?'

'I've asked him to stop.'

'Oh you can't do that; it's a wonderful sport. Donald couldn't live without it. I worry of course but to see his face when he wins is worth all the worry you'll see.'

It was a very thoughtful Stella who sat down to have dinner with David that evening and it wasn't long before David noticed her silence.

'What is it you look very troubled. Is it about my racing?'

'No it's something that we haven't discussed before. My clock is ticking. I want a baby?'

David knew this would arise. He had deliberately avoided talking about it.

'I know Stella I know but I can't you know?'

‘Yes you can. When Judy was here with Donald I took her aside and asked her how they got their son, thinking it was by AI. No she said it was theirs and then she gave me the phone number of a Gynae man who does it. We can have our own baby just like anyone else.

David smiled.

‘What are you smiling about?’

‘I was thinking, don’t you believe we should get married first?’

‘Yes I wondered when you would ask,’ she blushed.

‘I haven’t but I will. Imagine I am now down on one knee OK? Stella I love you will you marry me?’

‘Yes you fool, you can get up now and the both began to laugh.

The wedding was held in the Gymnasium. Brian was the best man. Donald and Judy were guests of honour. The three other paraplegics formed a guard of honour as Stella wearing a long white wedding dress walked down the central aisle between them on the arm of David’s mother. She was giving her away and was so very proud. David was waiting dressed in a smart pale blue suit with a rose in his lapel. It was a simple ceremony.

Judy had recommended Dr Hans Petersen the doctor whom she and Donald had consulted. He was from a Dutch family that had settled in England many years ago. His rooms were in Harley Street. Having arranged an appointment, Stella puzzled how to get there.

‘I think we should go by car,’ said David. ‘It’s the simplest for me.’

‘But where would we park?’

‘The receptionist said there was street parking.’

‘Yes but it’s usually full by 9 am and very expensive,’ added Stella. ‘Let’s go by train. I have checked the timetable, the 10.25 am from Doncaster gets into Kings Cross just after midday. That would give us enough time to get to Harley Street by 2.30pm.’

David was apprehensive as he wheeled himself to face the open train door. He was told that a ramp would be made available and looked around but nothing was happening.

‘Stella can you find someone to help?’ he asked. She was equally flummoxed. Where to go she wondered and then a breathless porter appeared pushing a ramp.

‘Sorry folks I’ve just come on and didn’t see the message about you.’ he said to David. ‘Sorry to keep you waiting.’

He stood by until all the other travellers had got on and then pushed the ramp so that it was facing the entrance.

‘Do you need a push?’ He asked David.

‘Maybe but let me try on my own.’ David steadied himself and started wheeling. As he mounted the ramp it became more difficult but he persevered and was soon inside the carriage.

‘That wasn’t too difficult,’ he said to Stella as he locked his chair near the window. ‘I think this is going to be fun,’ he announced to all, some of whom had turned to look at him. He still hadn’t got used to the stares. People didn’t know whether to say Hello or ignore him as they would to most others.

The rocking of the carriage soon made David drop off so he was unaware that they had arrived at Kings Cross.

Stella jogged him.

‘You had a good nap do you feel better?’

‘Thanks for letting me sleep I needed it.’

Stella tried to keep up as David wheeled himself to the taxi rank. There was a long queue extending for some distance when they joined it. The Assistant controlling the waiting passengers saw David and

immediately came over and wheeled him to the front of the queue.

‘What about them?’ David nodded to the people in the queue.

‘Don’t worry about them mate, they won’t mind.’

‘Thank you,’ David said as he moved his way up the queue.

‘No trouble mate,’ many replied.

Although the traffic was heavy the driver knew some short cuts and they were soon at the Harley Street address. David managed with the help of Stella to navigate the steps and he was shortly sitting in the waiting room. Without asking, the nurse brought them a cup of tea. They waited and then were called in before their appointment time. Someone had apparently cancelled.

Doctor Hans Petersen was younger than they had expected.

‘Good afternoon, I believe Judy West recommended you to see me. I guess she told you that I have made a special study of the problems facing families like yours in having a child. In the past it would not have been possible but thanks to new technology, that is no longer true and your chances are as good as anyone else’s.’

He outlined the procedure. It would require one more visit when the insemination would take place. This was ideally a few

days before the mid point between Stella's periods.

All went well and soon Stella was feeling fullness in her breasts and her periods had ceased. In preparation for the day, she had bought a pregnancy test and after dinner she and David set up the kit and waited. Slowly the tube turned blue, a positive test. They were both speechless as they watched the colour change. They looked at each other and hugged in silence. It was to be a day they would remember.

David was ecstatic. He was soon to become a father something that he had thought would be impossible, He told everyone he met and initially insisted on accompanying Stella to every antenatal appointments. On the twentieth week she was due for a routine scan. It clashed with a training session at the gym.

Kissing him goodbye in the morning she said, there is no need to come, it's only a routine test I will in be and out in a jiffy.'

As the weeks passed Stella no longer felt sick, her colour returned and she felt better than she had for years. David commented, 'I never seen you looking so beautiful, pregnancy really suits you we must do again. Stella smiled she was beginning to fear what was ahead. The weeks passed so

quickly and she was now only two weeks before the expected date. She had planned a normal delivery and had a rough idea when she would be admitted to the maternity ward.

It was early one morning before the light had slithered into their bedroom that she woke feeling apprehensive. She lay still listening to David's gentle snoring. Her belly felt heavy as she gently massaged it; a movement and then another and she smiled, it won't be long now she thought. A sharp stab of pain winded her, she gasped for breath. What was that? Then another more severe, was it starting? She waited suspended in doubt then she felt wetness between her legs. In the gloom she could see a dark stain on the sheets. I'm bleeding. Suddenly she panicked and jumped out of bed torn between calling an ambulance and driving to the hospital. Her movement woke David.

'Stella, what is it?'

'I'm bleeding; I must get to the hospital.'

'I'll call an ambulance.'

There was one patient already in the delivery room when she was rushed in. Nurse Morgan took one look and called the doctor on duty. He arrived in pyjamas. After a quick examination he yelled,

‘She needs a Caesarean, prepare the theatre.’

Within minutes Stella was asleep and on the operating table. The surgeon wasted no time and was soon easing a baby out of her womb; the child was blue and not breathing. He tied and cut the cord and handed it to the waiting nurse. They were used to having blue babies and quickly slipped into resuscitation mode. Within a few minutes the child became pink and let out a cry. The theatre staff smiled to each other as the surgeon closed up the wound.

Jamie was out on parole. He had heard through the grapevine that Stella and David had had a baby girl. He had completed the psychiatric programme and was free to look for a job. He now felt as if a weight had been lifted off him. He was no longer angry. He walked tall smiling and at ease with people. The fear that he carried had gone. As he regained his old confidence, he fancied returning to the army in some capacity.

He had had a long talk with his parole officer. They were now friends.

‘You’ll still need to check in with me each week and not leave the locality so it might be difficult for the army to find you a place.’ Despite that warning, Jamie went ahead and arranged an appointment with the

Recruiting Officer. Having completed the application he waited to be called in for interview. There were a number of others also waiting and they got into conversation. He listened as they spoke of their plans.

‘I hope they’ll accept me,’ said a tall red-haired man with a slight Irish accent. ‘My brother’s out there and says it’s a ball.’

He doesn’t know what he’s letting himself into thought Jamie and was tempted to speak up but the door opened and the man was called to enter.

Eventually it was Jamie’s turn. He stood up straightened his tie and entered. It was a small almost claustrophobic room with a low ceiling and minimal furniture. A uniformed officer was seated at the desk writing something. Without looking up he barked, ‘Sit down.’

Captain Oliver Wainwright came from an army family. He was the third generation and proudly wore his superiority. As he scanned Jamie’s application a scowl appeared on his face. He looked up and read aloud,

‘PTSD, the coward’s excuse.’ Jamie cringed at the words; the elation that he had felt drained away, his feelings showing on his face.

‘What’s the matter man? You know its true. Lack of moral fibre we used to call it.’

Jamie lept to his feet ready to leave,
 'Sit down! Man, don't be so stupid.
You came for a job didn't you,'
Jamie had by now regained his composure.
 'I think Sir,' he stammered. 'I have
made a mistake this is not the place for me.'
 He saluted, turned and left the room.
His mind was a blank as he walked out of
the building. The fresh air hit him and he
took great gasps as if had just almost
drowned.

 What am I going to do? There is no
place for me. Gradually a plan formed in his
mind.

 Stella was fast asleep when the
telephone rang. She was jerked awake by a
voice that was faintly familiar then she
realised it was Jamie.

 'Stella I.,' there was a pause, 'I can't
do this any more. I can't live with this guilt. I
just want to say I'm sorry, Goodbye.' and the
line went dead.

Now wide-awake, she shook David.

 'What is it?' he said half asleep.

 'That was Jamie. He said he'd had
enough. He sounded desperate.'

 'Where was he?'

 'Damn, I didn't ask.'

The two lay side by side in silence.

